

# Are Animals Member of Moral Community? A Critical Study

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## ABSTRACT

The primary aim of this paper is to illustrate the ethical status of non-human animals. The main question is whether sentient animals have moral significance. In this piece, we aim to discuss various points both supporting and opposing the moral status of animals. A significant point of discussion is marginal cases. It is argued that sentient animals possess moral status based on their interests in their experiential well-being, though this status varies only in degree. This text examines two significant interest-driven perspectives: DeGrazia's view that sentient beings possess interests in continued existence and that these interests warrant suitable moral consideration. Likewise, McMahan's TRIA asserts that animals have their own interests. Ultimately, this paper concludes that the human-centered perspective on animal ethics should be replaced with a biocentric approach.

**Keywords:** Animal, moral status, Marginal Case, Sentient Interest, Bio-centric

## INTRODUCTION

The main aim of this paper is to challenge the idea that non-human animals lack moral status. It offers significant reasons for their moral relevance. Indeed, it is argued that sentient animals should be regarded morally due to their interests in their experiential welfare. Every sentient animal possesses interests that deserve moral consideration. They are ethically significant, differing only in extent, not in type. Various animals possess varying levels of moral status. These alterations need to be considered when weighing the interests of humans and animals in a specific context. Traditionally, various arguments have been presented by different philosophers, especially concerning the moral standing of animals. One of the Western thinkers, Rene Descartes, claimed that animals are like machines, unable to feel or experience suffering. Descartes' mode of thought was soon eclipsed by the drive for intellect and logic that defined the 18th century and the Enlightenment era. During this time, there was a significant shift in the perception of animals, as several philosophers argued about the capacity of animals to experience suffering. For instance, Jeremy Bentham notably stated in 1789, "The issue is not, can they reason? They also cannot speak? "Yet, are they capable of experiencing pain?" British politician James Burgh likewise noted the ability of animals to experience suffering and was particularly worried about the effects that ignorance could have on children. In his work, "Dignity of Human Nature," Burgh noted that "Children should be made aware of what they often overlook, that an animal can experience feelings, even if it cannot express them, and that being cruel to a beast or insect is as much an act of cruelty, and as genuinely immoral, as when it is directed towards our own kind." In the early 19th century, our perspective on animals shifted to a more compassionate and rational appreciation of their experiences. Darwin contended that animals have

the ability to experience pain and share many similarities with humans. He unquestioningly accepted that animals could experience various emotions and feelings similar to humans. He further asserted that at least a few animals possessed the ability of self-awareness.

The fundamental issue is whether animals that are not human possess moral status. Another question that arises is whether humans, as moral agents, have responsibilities toward non-human animals. One area of ethics known as animal ethics examines the essential question of whether animals deserve moral consideration, suggesting that humans, as moral agents, should account for their interests when making ethical choices. Various ethical theories have responded to this question in diverse ways. Generally believed that animals are different from humans. They lack moral status because they do not possess the traits of moral beings, such as rationality, autonomy, self-awareness, and communication skills. Therefore, humans hold no moral obligations to animals. If we adhere to the conventional belief that animals lack moral status, what does that imply for Marginal humans? One of the strongest arguments for the moral consideration of animals is the argument stemming from marginal cases or marginal humans. It contests the conventional belief that animals lack moral standing. In this context, the phrase 'marginal humans' refers to individuals who are missing certain traits that are conventionally viewed as important attributes for moral standing. Certain philosophers categorize three distinct kinds of marginal humans: 'pre-moral' humans, who are potential moral beings and will join the moral community if they develop normally, similar to infants. Another marginal human is 'post-moral', similar to adult humans who are moral yet have ceased to be so due to their advanced age or health issues. Lastly, the 'non-moral' grown individuals who have never belonged to the moral community because of severe mental illness.

The primary concern raised by the argument regarding marginal cases is that not all humans have complete rationality, autonomy, self-awareness, etc. These so-called marginal humans are deficient in these ethically important characteristics to a degree that warrants moral consideration. Many research efforts have shown that specific animals are more evolved than certain humans. The main assertion of this argument is that if marginal humans are assigned moral value, then non-human animals possessing comparable morally relevant traits ought to be viewed as morally significant as well. Given the predicament, we must acknowledge that either marginal humans have a minimal moral status akin to that of animals or that animals share the same moral status as marginal humans. In other words, the moral status of animals should be on par with that of marginalized humans. Consequently, if marginal humans are considered to have moral worth, then the moral worth of appropriately comparable animals should also be recognized. On the other hand, if animals do not possess moral significance, then that same moral importance does not apply to marginal humans. The argument presented above clearly shows that animals possess moral standing and deserve the same moral status as marginal humans. An approach to refute this argument is by using the argument from types. It is asserted that humans are a type of beings that are generally morally significant, and this does not rely on the traits of an individual being but on the distinct characteristics of their species. Typically, human beings belong to the moral community, and the reality is that certain humans, termed marginal cases, do not negate their moral significance. Unlike human beings, non-human animals are not part of the moral community, nor do they have the capacity to belong to it. They do not belong to that type of being that would join a moral community.

The argument presented above evidently pertains to "speciesism," which asserts that only humans deserve moral consideration. In the 1970s, Richard Ryder invented this term during his campaign in Oxford to signify a universal kind of human-centered bias, which he believed was similar to racism. He was against prioritizing one's own species while exploiting or hurting individuals of different species. Peter Singer

brought attention to the concept and emphasized how speciesism, lacking moral justification, preferentially benefits human interests. All humans are believed to warrant moral consideration, while no animals do, since they are not part of the human kind, despite some animals possessing abilities akin to those of marginal humans. This is a biased perspective, as there is no evident justification for prioritizing the interests of individuals from one species group while similarly denying the same interests to members of different species. Species affiliation is a morally insignificant trait, an element of chance that holds no greater moral significance than being born in Malaysia or Canada. In the same way, a morally insignificant trait cannot justify an opinion that our species merits moral regard that is not granted to individuals of other species.

One more pertinent criterion for moral considerability might be the possession of a particular trait or capability, which acts as a basis for attributing moral value to a being. Nevertheless, current scientific findings show that all the characteristics and skills seen in humans can similarly be observed, to differing degrees, in non-human animals. Many researchers have argued that the distinctions between humans and non-human animals are simply differences in degree, not in kind. Indeed, there are inadequate justifications to distinguish between humans and non-human animals regarding the refusal of moral consideration. However, there is a significant factor thought to set humans apart from non-humans that cannot solely be linked to visible actions accounted for by having specific skills, and that is our idea of “personhood.” The perspective on personhood defines a group of morally significant entities that are believed to be on par with humanity. Historically, Kant is widely recognized as the foremost advocate of personhood as the characteristic that confers value on a being and, consequently, moral significance. according to Kant,

...every rational being, exists as an end in himself and not merely as a means to be arbitrarily used by this or that will...Beings whose existence depends not on our will but on nature have, nevertheless, if they are not rational beings, only a relative value as means and are therefore called things. On the other hand, rational beings are called persons inasmuch as their nature already marks them out as ends in themselves. Nevertheless, Kant's perspective on personhood does not differentiate exclusively humans as morally significant. In reality, personhood does not equate to humanity when viewed as a comprehensive description of the category to which humans belong, and the intriguing aspect of this issue is not the potential existence of aliens or gods possessing rational abilities. The crucial issue is that numerous humans do not qualify as persons. Certain humans, such as infants, children, and individuals in comas, lack the rational and self-reflective abilities tied to personhood. Regrettably, this issue is commonly referred to as the "marginal cases" problem, which poses challenges for using “personhood” as the standard for moral consideration. Many entities that we have strong intuitive beliefs about regarding their moral worth, and which we regard as having moral significance, will be left out of the discussion. Although Kant believed that animals were simply objects, it appears he did not truly think we could treat them in any manner we wished. In the Lectures on Ethics, he clarifies that we hold indirect responsibilities to animals, which are not duties to the animals themselves but relate to them in the sense that our actions towards them can influence our responsibilities to humans. If a person kills his horse because it can no longer serve, he does not neglect his obligation to the horse, as the horse lacks the ability to evaluate actions. However, his action is cruel and harms the humanity within himself that he is required to express towards others. To avoid stifling his human emotions, he must show kindness to non-human animals, because one who is harsh to animals becomes callous in their interactions with people as well.

## THE MORAL STATUS OF NON-HUMAN ANIMALS

When we talk about the moral status of non-human animals, we first need to grasp the idea of moral considerability or moral status. DeGrazia's view on moral status implies possessing independent or direct ethical significance. The ethical significance of a being utilizing moral status is deeply linked to the interests or welfare of that being. A being Y possesses moral status if: (1) moral agents are obligated towards Y, (2) Y has interests, and (3) some obligations are grounded in Y's interests. When considering the ethical status of animals, it seems essential to investigate their mental experiences more thoroughly to understand their interests and what it truly entails to consider those interests. Our perspective is crucial in determining how we should treat animals and the mental abilities we assign to them. Thus, we can differentiate between animals that lack sentience, those that possess sentience as nonpersons, and animals that might be considered borderline cases of persons, such as great apes and dolphins. Sentience can be described as the capacity to perceive or undergo feelings, sensations, emotions, and moods, reflecting the presence of conscious experience. Numerous scientists believe that the ability to experience pain is adequate for sentience. DeGrazia believes that the existing evidence backs the idea that mammals and birds are generally sentient creatures, although there is considerable evidence suggesting that most vertebrates are predominantly sentient as well and that at least cephalopods among invertebrates also share this characteristic. These aware nonhumans are always present in our thoughts when considering the ethical standing of animals, such as cats, dogs, cows, rodents, and eagles.

The definition of sentient indicates that such beings possess an experiential well-being or welfare, which is shared among all sentient creatures, along with interests concerning their experiential welfare. We perceive interest as an element of an individual's well-being rather than something that simply engages a person's curiosity. As a result, they have interests; animals may experience harm, since the primary concern regarding one's welfare is to avoid pain. DeGrazia asserts that conscious animals possess a certain level of moral status. Thus, they should not be subjected to cruelty. Regardless of the moral status of animals, we can discuss our responsibilities towards them, including the duty to avoid causing them unnecessary harm, which is based on their interests in their particular experiential well-being.

Nonetheless, opinions vary on whether non-human animals possess the same moral status as humans or if they differ in moral standing, as well as on whether we ought to grant equal consideration to their interests. An equal consideration perspective emphasizes that we ought to regard the interests of human beings and sentient animals equally, providing identical moral importance to their comparable interests. An instance of this kind of interest common among various species can be found in the aforementioned experiential well-being. This implies that inflicting pain on a sentient animal is just as wrong as doing so to a human being, which certainly contradicts how we typically treat animals. In this perspective, it can be seen that while all sentient beings warrant equal moral attention regarding their shared interests, numerous interests are not alike, which accounts for differing moral protections. It is evident that the interests of humans and animals regarding life are not the same, as humans possess a stronger interest in remaining alive; therefore, taking a human life is considered worse than ending that of a sentient animal. Such perspectives align with the instincts of the majority of people, including those who adore animals and advocate for animal rights. In situations of conflict, when there is a choice between saving a human or an animal, it is generally accepted that a human should be prioritized over an animal.

Another model for theorizing the distinction in moral status between humans and animals is referred to as unequal consideration of interests. These theories suggest that while sentient animals possess moral status and their interests merit consideration, the interests of animals hold lesser moral significance than those

of individuals. This implies that it is ethically more objectionable to inflict suffering on a person than to inflict the same amount of suffering on a conscious animal, as, while their interests in avoiding suffering are alike, the interests of the person hold greater moral importance than those of a sentient nonhuman. There are two distinct models of the observation that humans possess a higher moral status than animals, which claims varying degrees of moral status. In this "two-tier model," one assigns a higher level of moral status to humans and a lower level of moral status to sentient non-humans. DeGrazia's "sliding-scale model" asserts that there exists a hierarchy of moral status based on the levels of cognitive, emotional, and social complexity present in a being. Every individual possesses a greater equality in moral status, while sentient non-human animals differ in the extent of their moral standing. This model indicates that humans possess the greatest moral status, succeeded by great apes and dolphins, then other monkeys and elephants, other mammals, and so forth down the evolutionary hierarchy to barely sentient creatures.

Various kinds of arguments can be presented to back the sliding-scale perspective that moral status exists in different degrees. It can also be stated that individuals are distinct in their moral standing due to their capacity as moral agents. Additionally, they possess ethical duties and responsibilities that warrant their elevated moral standing. Non-human animals are not considered moral agents, yet as sentient beings, they possess a lower level of moral status. Moreover, if sentience is regarded as the main standard for moral status, then various types of sentient beings possess varying levels of sentience. Complementary arguments relate to our intuitive perception that humans and animals possess differing levels of moral status.

De Grazia acknowledges that animals deserve moral consideration, and we hold responsibilities towards them regarding their welfare or interests. He acknowledges that numerous animals possess moral status, yet there are important moral distinctions between various species. If we consider the concept of varying degrees of moral status, then whether animals can be seen as borderline cases of persons, such as great apes and dolphins, or sentient non-human animals, including other mammals and birds, becomes significant. He also believed that it would be incorrect to assume that human lives are more valuable than those of sentient animals simply because humans possess certain abilities that sentient animals do not. Although some animals possess particular abilities that are not available to any other human. In reality, certain animals possess more advanced senses than humans, such as their hearing and smell, leading to more enriched sensory experiences than those of humans, which enhance their well-being. There is no universal record of values that applies to all types of beings, and the evaluation of life's value varies from one being to another.

He also believed that humans, as moral beings, have responsibilities toward sentient animals due to their moral status. Different sentient animals possess varying degrees of moral status; however, this does not imply that human responsibilities shift accordingly. The assumption that, according to DeGrazia, sufficiently clarifies the claim that death negatively affects humans more than sentient animals is Jeff McMahan's Time-Relative Interest Account, or TRIA. The core concept of the TRIA, regarding the impact of death, is that when assessing how detrimental a specific death is to the person who passes away, we must consider not only the worth of the life they would have lived had they not died at that moment—referred to here as the net good of life—but also the degree to which the individual is emotionally connected to their potential future life at the time of their death. As per this explanation, the value of the life that was lost depends on the quality of that specific life and its quantity. Quantity is measured in the time lost during life, whereas quality is determined by the personal experience of life's quality. The concept of psychological connectedness involves a feeling of connection to one's past self as well as to one's future

self.

De Grazia contended that many animals we encounter daily, such as pets and domestic creatures, along with most animals in zoos and labs, are sentient beings that possess varying degrees of psychological harmony. They possess the ability to experience pain, but also maintain an enduring wish to avoid pain, which fosters a psychological bond with oneself over time. Thus, slaughtering those animals is less detrimental than it would be if it involved humans; death still robs them of lives that could have been valuable to develop. He believes that our existing practice of utilizing animals is morally indefensible. He emphasizes the need to cease, at minimum, the customary practice of killing animals' post-experiments.

De Grazia and McMahan contend that moral status is not an 'all-or-nothing' occurrence, asserting that there exists a spectrum of degrees of moral status. Sentient beings or individuals with fundamental awareness, which allows them to have interests, possess a minimal moral status, and our approach to them should be directed solely by our consideration for their interests. Animals are sentient creatures that can experience physical pain similar to humans, yet they lack self-awareness. They lack desires or plans for the future and cannot make arrangements, which weakens their psychological connection to their future selves.

Many individuals commonly believe that taking the life of a human is worse than taking the life of an animal. It mainly clarified for many of us that a person should be saved rather than an animal, by stating that humans possess a greater degree of well-being than animals. McMahan notes that the degree and type of well-being an individual can achieve is influenced by their cognitive and emotional abilities and potentials. Since animals lack many abilities possessed by humans, their level of well-being is lower than that of humans. Nevertheless, an animal, despite having a comparatively lower level of well-being than a typical adult human, can still be content and lead a fulfilling life.

McMahan's reasoning for why death is unfavourable for a person who dies relies on the extent of the loss experienced by that person. When someone passes away, it entails the loss of significant future benefits, and that individual would have had a deep connection to the matter of the good that is forfeited. Various humans, along with most animals, primarily exist in the present and are mostly psychologically detached from their future selves, similar to how humans are during the early phases of life. The strength of an animal's desire to keep living relies not just on the future benefits it loses due to death, but also on how psychologically bonded it feels to its future self. However, the loss of future benefits adds to the negativity of death; animals have a very loose psychological bond with their future selves, resulting in no desire for future goods at the moment of death. The less one feels psychologically connected to their future self, the weaker their desire to continue living becomes, resulting in a less distressing death. Since animals are not considered persons, according to McMahan's statement, they lack the rights that human persons possess, making it incapable of being an argument against this practice or a basis for its dismissal. Nevertheless, even though they lack rights, animals possess interests. McMahan believes that this practice ought to be reconsidered by considering the relevant interests involved. In a particular situation, we ought to assess the interests of those impacted by it and evaluate them to determine which interests hold more weight.

When the interests of an animal, such as a hen, are weighed against those of humans in the same context, it becomes evident that the animal's desire to continue living and the benefits it would experience in life surpass the interests of people in savouring a meat meal. Yet, if we merely contrast the joy that thirty individuals might experience from consuming the animal, like a hen, with the enjoyment that the hen would derive from having multiple meals daily over several years. It is evident that the joys experienced by the hen would surpass the enjoyment thirty individuals would derive from consuming that hen rather

than opting for a vegetarian dish. Naturally, the intensity of the animal's interests must be diminished due to its limited psychological link to its future interests; however, the animal's interest in survival, as illustrated by the hen in the example, would surpass the people's desire to consume it. Consequently, McMahan contends that the approach of treating animals "compassionately" while ending their lives without pain cannot be defended by considering the interests of all involved, as the harm inflicted by animal slaughter significantly surpasses the advantages experienced by "humane" meat-eaters or those who consume both plants and animals.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper was to demonstrate why the conventional belief that animals lack moral standing is no longer defensible. An alternative perspective has been proposed asserting that sentient animals deserve moral consideration because of their interests. Nowadays, everyone's grasp of morality is highly anthropocentric. Only humans are viewed as moral agents, whereas animals are excluded from the moral community. The perspective that the moral community ought to broaden to encompass other species highlights that the limits of moral considerability do not align with the limits of our species. The limit of human species is founded on only biological data. It holds no moral significance, and a solid ethical framework should not rely on prejudice or subjective favouritism that benefits our own species - speciesism. Evidence indicates that certain morally relevant traits of human beings and other species intersect, and that numerous animals possess these morally significant characteristics or abilities. Sentience is typically regarded as a morally significant trait, and varying perspectives mainly differ on whether the moral standing of animals aligns with that of humans or not. An effort to transcend the anthropocentric perspective and progress towards a biocentric understanding of our surrounding environment. It would require recognizing that humans are not the focal point of the universe and that every living creature possesses its own worth. They lead their lives based on their passions. The biocentric perspective is particularly crucial in addressing ethical issues related to the moral standing of animals. A bio-centric principle respects the existence of all sentient beings, whether human or non-human, since every sentient life form experience well-being and can thrive or suffer in varying degrees. Utilizing the ethical framework of biocentrism to safeguard the well-being of non-human animals, on the assumption that we value their welfare and find it significant how we interact with other sentient beings, regardless of their species, would allow us to foster an environment that promotes greater well-being for all sentient creatures.

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