

The Six Principles of the Abolitionist Approach to Animal Rights

Principle One

Abolitionists maintain that all sentient beings, human or nonhuman, have one right—the basic right not to be treated as the property of others.

Summary

Animals are classified as property and are used exclusively as resources for humans. Although we claim to regard animals as having moral value and to not be just things, their status as property means that they have no moral value; they have only economic value. We recognize that treating humans as property is inconsistent with recognizing humans as members of the moral community. We accept as a fundamental moral principle that all humans, irrespective of their particular characteristics, must be accorded the basic moral right not to be property. On this principle rests the universal condemnation of human slavery. The property status of animals means that animals are considered to be things, irrespective of what we say to the contrary. There is no way to distinguish humans from nonhumans that can justify withholding from all sentient nonhumans the same right that we accord to all humans. We need to recognize that all sentient beings are equal for the purpose of not being used exclusively as human resources. The Abolitionist Approach maintains that all animal use—however supposedly “humane”—is morally unjustified.

Principle Two

Abolitionists maintain that our recognition of this one basic right means that we must abolish, and not merely regulate, institutionalized animal exploitation, and that abolitionists should not support welfare reform campaigns or single-issue campaigns.

Summary

Recognizing the right of animals not to be used as property requires that we abolish the institutionalized exploitation of nonhuman animals, and not just regulate it to make it more “humane.” Abolitionists reject animal welfare campaigns. They also reject single-issue campaigns, a particular sort of regulatory campaign that characterizes certain forms of animal exploitation as different from, and worse than, other forms of exploitation and which suggests, by implication, that other forms of exploitation are acceptable. Both welfare campaigns and single-issue campaigns actually promote animal exploitation and result in partnerships between supposed animal advocates and institutionalized exploiters.

Principle Three

Abolitionists maintain that veganism is a moral baseline and that creative, nonviolent vegan education must be the cornerstone of rational animal rights advocacy.

Summary

Abolitionists embrace the idea that there is veganism and there is animal exploitation: there is no third choice. To not be a vegan is to participate directly in animal exploitation. Abolitionists promote veganism as a moral baseline or a moral imperative and as the only rational response to the recognition that animals have moral value. If animals matter morally, then we cannot treat them as commodities and eat, wear, or use them. Just as someone who promoted the abolition of slavery could not own slaves, an abolitionist with respect to animal slavery cannot consume animal products. For an abolitionist, veganism is a fundamental matter of justice. As the Abolitionist Approach is a grassroots movement, advocating veganism as a fundamental principle of justice is not something that requires large, wealthy charities and “leaders.” It is something that we all can do and must do as a grassroots movement. Each of us must be a leader.

Principle Four

The Abolitionist Approach links the moral status of nonhumans with sentience alone and not with any other cognitive characteristic; all sentient beings are equal for the purpose of not being used exclusively as a resource.

Summary

Sentience is subjective awareness; there is someone who perceives and experiences the world. A sentient being has interests; that is, preferences, wants, or desires. If a being is sentient, then that is necessary and sufficient for the being to have the right not to be used as a means to human ends. The recognition of this right imposes on humans the moral obligation not to use that being as a resource. It is not necessary for a sentient being to have humanlike cognitive characteristics in order to be accorded the right not to be used as property.

Principle Five

Abolitionists reject all forms of human discrimination, including racism, sexism, heterosexism, ageism, ableism, and classism—just as they reject speciesism.

Summary

The Abolitionist Approach to Animal Rights rejects speciesism because, like racism, sexism, heterosexism, and other forms of human discrimination, it uses a morally irrelevant criterion (species) to discount and devalue the interests of sentient beings. But any opposition to speciesism makes sense only as part of a general opposition to all forms of discrimination. That is, we cannot oppose speciesism but claim that, as animal advocates, we do not have a position on these other forms of discrimination. We cannot say that we reject species as a morally objectionable criterion to discount or devalue the interests of nonhumans but that we do not have a position on whether race, sex, or sexual orientation/preference are morally objectionable criteria when used to discount or devalue human interests. Our opposition to speciesism requires that we oppose all discrimination.

Principle Six

Abolitionists recognize the principle of nonviolence as a core principle of the animal rights movement.

Summary

The Abolitionist Approach promotes nonviolence because it sees the animal rights movement as an extension of the peace movement to include concerns about nonhuman animals. Moreover, given that most people engage in animal exploitation, there is no principled way to distinguish exploiters for the purpose of justifying violence. Finally, because there is pervasive exploitation, violence cannot be understood as anything but a pathological reaction to what is regarded as normal. The only real option is, on the individual level, to embrace veganism as a moral baseline and, on the social level, to engage in creative, nonviolent vegan education from an abolitionist perspective.

A Note: In order to embrace the abolitionist approach to animal rights, it is not necessary to be spiritual or religious, or to be an atheist. You can be a spiritual or religious person, or you can be an atheist, or anything in between. It does not matter.

What does matter is:

- (1) that you have moral concern about animals and that you want to do right by animals. That moral concern/moral impulse can come from any source, spiritual or non-spiritual; and
- (2) that you regard as valid the logical arguments that our moral concern should not be limited to some nonhumans but should extend to all sentient beings and that we should abolish, and not regulate, animal exploitation.

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