

# Compassionate Action for Animals

## Why Animal Rights? The Basics of Compassion

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The question often arises, “why should I be concerned about what our society does to animals?” The question has two sides: why should we care if animals suffer, and how much do animals suffer in our society?

We only have to open our eyes to a few very common practices to see that animals do suffer terribly. The typical image of animals raised for food from children's books and advertising – pigs wandering comfortably in a farmyard or chickens pecking at the ground near their nest of straw – intentionally ignores the horrors that the vast majority of food animals suffer. Virtually all pigs and chickens (for eggs or meat) live in tiny metal cages, with barely enough room to move around, let alone fulfill their natural behaviors. A large and ever-increasing portion of dairy cows suffer similarly. Well over 90% of the roughly 10 billion farm animals annually killed for food in the US live in facilities that anyone would call factories, rather than farms, and the suffering of the animals is considered no more important than the suffering of the tools and materials in any other factory.

The animal factory owners like to tell the public that they care about their animals – that they have to because those animals are their livelihood. But what they care about is whether the animals grow rather than die. Their suffering is not part of the consideration. If someone was discovered treating dogs and cats (animals with comparable intelligence to pigs) the way food animals are treated from birth to slaughter, it would make headlines in the local paper and appall almost every reader.

The intelligence and awareness of non-human animals are made clear, and are terribly abused, when they are used as entertainment. The animals “perform” because they are motivated by their desire to escape intense pain and injury (in rodeos) or their need to get food and avoid punishment (in circuses and aquatic shows). Even in most zoos, the animals are literally driven insane by their stressful conditions. We live in a society which often condemns entertainment that is thought to demean, objectify, or harm human performers, even when they are well-compensated volunteers. Yet we force animals who are smart enough to perform complicated activities to do so for our gratification.

Even beyond food and entertainment, where the physical injuries and suffering of the animals are an incidental (though inevitable) side-effect, animal experimentation frequently is centered on physically injuring the animal. Experimental animals are chosen because of their physiological similarity to us. This similarity, along with their reactions, makes it quite clear they feel pain and suffer from it. They have their eyes or skin burned with chemicals or are force-fed chemicals until they die of poisoning. Advocates of animal experimentation dodge responsibility for their cruelty by playing on public fears of disease and pretending that animal research leads to cures. Yet most animal research is not directed at curing disease. To the extent that some animal research does contribute to human health, we have to ask why we use animals, which often give results that are very misleading when applied to humans, instead of conscripting humans as research subjects.

The question seems barbaric to even ask. Fortunately our society has (fairly recently) become compassionate enough to not keep people as slaves, who could be treated as unfeeling objects. We still fight wars and kill our enemies, but we never consider capturing them for experiments that might help cure cancer. The use of prisoners in World War II for medical research and entertainment strikes us as unbelievably appalling and has provoked a half-century of soul-searching about humanity. Yet we do not hesitate to do such things to hundreds of millions of our fellow mammals.

Why should we care about animals? The differences between us and them are not so great. They think, they feel, and they can suffer. Many non-human animals are more intelligent than many humans. We cannot prove other animals suffer and feel, but none of us can actually prove that for any other human either. Instead, we assume it is true for other humans because they are like us and act in ways that suggest their feelings. Anyone who has ever interacted with animals, from dogs to cows to mice, knows that they too are like us and they communicate their feelings. As an enlightened society, we have come to recognize the basic similarities of people of different races, of men and women, and of children and elders. The lines our predecessors drew between these sets of human animals are not much different from the one we draw between us and other animals. It is time that we broadened our circle of compassion.

This philosophical question would be much more challenging if humans derived large benefits from exploiting animals. But we don't. A strict vegetarian (vegan) diet, one free of meat, dairy, and eggs, is much healthier than what most Americans eat, and may be the healthiest possible diet. (More information about this is available from Compassionate Action for Animals.) Most animal experimentation provides little value, and most of it can be replaced by cruelty-free methods as many researchers have already done. If the huge sums spent on expensive animal research were directed to less-flashy but more effective health promotion, there would be a huge net gain. And, of course, we can find excellent entertainment that does not include breaking the backs of terrified fleeing calves or getting big cats to jump through flaming hoops.

What can I do?

Start by educating yourself (and others if you can). The animal-food industries, animal researchers, and others who use animals do not want you to know what goes on behind their walls. We agree with their assessment: If you knew what really went on, you would want no part of it. More information is available from Compassionate Action for Animals.

The most important step is to adopt a vegan lifestyle. In addition to the direct impact of eliminating the suffering of the animals that would have ended up on your plate, it allows you to think about the everyday cruelty -- something that is hard to do when you are a part of it.

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