

## **Wildsingapore News**

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### **Of animals, rights and moral agency**

*By Andy Ho Straits Times*

SOME 25 dolphins are now being trained overseas to provide visitors with an interactive experience at Resorts World Sentosa (RWS).

But animal rights group Animal Concerns Research and Education Society (Acres) is urging RWS to release the dolphins back into the wild. Its campaign garnered about 13,800 signatures. Another 800,000 have been gathered by two foreign groups.

Basically, Acres argues that dolphins need to roam freely. Freer dolphins are presumably happier and happiness being the highest good is surely unassailable as an axiom of truth. Or so the theory goes.

But would freer animals be happier?

To say dolphins need to roam free is to accord them the human right to liberty, one inextricably linked to the security of person. Indeed, activists like to assert that animals are persons, not property: RWS should not be owning dolphins. To own, confine and use animals as property is institutionalised slavery.

Some would argue that animals are persons simply because they are sentient beings, with sensory responses and the ability to feel pain. Animals feel pain, but it is arguable whether they suffer. Pain is physical; suffering is mental anguish.

Undeniably, animals do suffer physical pain. Dr Peter Singer argues in *Animal Liberation* (1990) that language is 'necessary for abstract thought but states like pain are more primitive'. If infants suffer pain, so too can animals. The argument then goes that it is wrong to hurt or destroy something that feels pain.

But it is hard to see how enclosing the RWS dolphins in a pen and training them under the eyes of a team led by five vets would inflict pain or destroy them, if they are handled so they suffer no physical pain or bodily discomfort.

Even humans have no ironclad protection from pain wilfully inflicted. Just take Osama bin Laden, assassinated presumably to prevent more loss of lives he might have ordered.

However unpalatable activists may find it to be, animals are often sacrificed to meet human ends. The entire livestock and meat industry is premised on that, as is the practice of testing drugs on animals. Moral theorists argue that using animals in the laboratories is morally acceptable because the practice eventually leads to cures for or prevention of deadly illnesses in millions of human beings.

Perhaps animals feel not only physical pain but also emotions. Indeed, *The Animal Ethics Reader* (2006) urges people to use 'ordinary empathic experiences' to address questions about animal

welfare. But when we describe animal lives using human language, we project anthropomorphically onto animals.

In *Swann's Way* (1922), French essayist Marcel Proust surmised that it is only in the literary imagination that one can enter another human being's mind and life. We can do that accurately because we know what it is to be human.

But we do not know what it is to be an animal and should not rely too much on such imaginative leaps to make moral arguments.

Another favoured argument is that sheer morality requires that animals be accorded rights of liberty and security. In other words, being kind to life, of whatever species, is the right thing to do.

This is all very well. But taken to its logical end, it suggests that animals - who have rights to liberty and security - must perforce respect those rights in their kind. This is clearly nonsense since animals have no moral agency.

Nature raw in tooth and nail is predatory, vicious and deadly. Animals do not respect rights because, lacking moral agency, they do not know how to do so. Thus they cannot be held accountable for their actions. If so, animals are amoral but this also means it cannot be sheer morality which requires that animals have rights.

If predators were moral agents, they would be held morally responsible for doing lunch. Absurd as this sounds, some people in mediaeval Europe - and even up to the 18th century - did project upon animals the very human notion of crime.

They then prosecuted and punished, even publicly executed, such 'criminals'. In *The Criminal Prosecution And Capital Punishment Of Animals* (1906), Edward Evans describes a 14th-century case in which an 'infanticidal sow was executed in the old Norman city of Falaise'.

Such a non sequitur arises only because of the failure to recognise that humans are accorded rights in exchange for responsibilities because people are moral agents who can be held responsible for their actions.

It is this failure that led British indie star Morrissey to rant on stage recently about how Anders Behring Breivik's massacre of 69 people on the Norwegian island of Utoeya was 'nothing compared to what happens in McDonald's and Kentucky Fried S\*\*\* every day'.

It also led to *People v Garcia* (2006), in which a New York trial court convicted a person of cruelty for killing a goldfish.

Animals are not moral agents that can take on responsibilities. So, they cannot be ascribed rights. They are not persons.

But we are not free to abuse animals thereby. This fact, however, is derived from the fact that we are moral agents, for whom human morality dictates that we be humane towards animals.

Animals have a right to be free  
Straits Times Forum 26 Aug 11;

I REFER to Dr Andy Ho's commentary ("Of animals, rights and moral agency"; Aug 18).

Animals are not humans and should not be treated as such. They cannot be held accountable for their actions - they kill for food or to protect themselves or their young because it is their nature to do so.

The argument of "rights in exchange for responsibility" does not apply to animals precisely because they are not human. That does not mean they have no right to liberty. Liberty is not just for humans, but for all living things that are born to be free.

Animals feel not just physical pain but also mental anguish such as stress. This can be observed in animals in captivity. It is apparent in animal mothers whose babies are taken away from them.

It is also apparent in animals that are not able to do the things they would normally do in their natural habitat due to their confinement.

Human morality demands that we recognise that animals have a right to be free, just like humans.

Alia Gan (Madam)

Plant-based diet can be healthy  
Straits Times Forum 26 Aug 11;

DR ANDY Ho noted that "animals are often sacrificed to meet human ends. The entire livestock and meat industry is premised on that" ("Of animals, rights and moral agency"; Aug 18).

He also stated that "we are not free to abuse animals".

However, the meat industry represents unnecessary abuse of animals. Most of our meat comes from factory farming, an industry replete with practices that abuse animals, such as separating children from their mothers, depriving pigs, chickens, cows and so on of anything approaching natural lives, and then ending their lives far in advance of their normal lifespans.

As Dr Ho pointed out in an earlier article ("Rabbit food diet still unproven"; July 30), a plant-based diet can be healthy. Thus, all the suffering we inflict on animals is unnecessary. By adding more plant foods to our diet, we can be healthy, perhaps even healthier, and we can enjoy a diet that is kind to the sentient beings with whom we share the planet.

If we humans are really as intelligent and powerful as we would like to think we are, we should be able to figure out how to live with dolphins, chickens, pigs, cows and others in a benevolent, not abusive, manner.

Dr George Jacobs  
President  
Vegetarian Society (Singapore)