

*This is a brief presentation of a deontological defense of basic negative animal rights theory inspired by the work of T. Regan ([*The Case for Animal Rights*](#)), G. Francione ([*The Abolitionist Approach*](#)) and Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka in their book [*Zoopolis. A Political Theory of Animal Rights*](#) (Oxford University Press, 2011) which recently won the biennial Book prize at the Canadian Philosophical Association.

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Nonspeciesist Arguments against Animal Experimentation

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[Panel Discussion on the Ethics of Animal Experimentation in Science](#)

McGill University, Rutherford Physics Building, room 112
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I am an ethical vegan and an ecofeminist profoundly opposed to the idea that other sentient animals exist for our use.

I wasn't born that way. I wasn't raised that way, either.

In fact, I was raised thinking that other sentient creatures do exist for our use. In my mind, the animal world was divided between farm animals, companion animals, pests, lab animals, wild animals, and so on. I was raised **dividing the animal world** according to **their respecting utility for us**.

While it is relatively easy to convince people that we should take care of **domesticated animals** used as **companions** and that we should respect **wild animals** (at least those with **symbolic** or **ecological value**), it is a lot harder to get people to have compassion and respect for farm animals and lab animals.

Like **farm animals**, **lab animals** technically do exist for our use. Their ontology (**what they are**) and their teleology (**what they are made for**) are our own purposes : they are **lab rats** or **lab dogs** after all.

I won't debate the **instrumental value** and the **utility** of animal experimentation for human beings (which is usually the central topic of discussion on panels devoted to the ethics of animal experimentation).

I would like to start by asking why animals are used in invasive and deprivational research, rather than human beings. Obviously, using **humans** would be much **more useful**.

We don't use them because it would be **morally wrong** to do so. Why? What makes it morally wrong to experiment on human beings without their informed consent for the greater good of others?

Is it simply **because they are human**? Appealing to a biological criterion (such as being *homo sapiens*) without explaining what makes this feature morally relevant begs the question.

We need to explain **which characteristic** shared by all human beings makes them inappropriate subjects for invasive or deprivational research performed without their consent

Is it because humans are **rational beings**? This can't be the answer. What would prevent us from experimenting on less intelligent human beings, then, like people with cognitive disabilities?

We have done so in the past and should be profoundly ashamed of it. It was morally wrong whether or not it was useful. So intelligence, rationality or abstract reasoning cannot be the answer.

If we all deserve to be respected, to be allowed to live, be free from torture and captivity, it is not because we are rational beings. It is because we are all **sentient beings, vulnerable selves** who value our brief existence on this planet.

All human beings, regardless of their age, their ability to reason or talk, etc. deserve protection of their most basic interests. **Universal and inalienable rights** are not based on a **sophisticated understanding of personhood**, but on mere **possession of selfhood** (Donaldson and Kymlicka, 2011).

But **animals are selves too**. The value of their lives cannot be reduced to the value they have for us.

No matter how **insignificant** the life of some people or some animals may look like from an outside perspective, as soon as we are **able to recognize another self**, this imposes on us a strong **duty not to harm, enslave or kill** this vulnerable individual.

Those who think that they can use animals because **human lives are more valuable** than animal lives need to understand that "**judgments concerning the value of lives have nothing to do with fundamental rights**" (Donaldson and Kymlicka, 2011).

The death of a child may be **more tragic** than the death of an elderly person, but that doesn't mean we are justified in killing the old to provide organs for the young. The **different value** we attribute to their lives does not justify the sacrifice of one for the sake of the other.

The **equality of rights** means we should respect the basic interests not only of people we love or admire, but also of the individuals we consider inferior, expendable, deprived, or not worth living.

So you don't need to believe that the lives of other animals are as valuable as the lives of humans to recognize them basic rights to exist, to live free from torture and captivity – you just need to recognize them as individuals, as selves.

Political philosophers Will Kymlicka and Sue Donaldson explained :“The reason that individuals have basic rights [...] is because **their lives are precious to them, not to external observers**. We have a right to life because we are conscious subjects, and our lives mean everything to us, regardless of the assessment of others. [...] It's not important how much *I* value *your* life. It's important that you value your life, and that I am able to respect that.” (Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka, “[Do We Need a Political Theory of Animal Rights?](#)”, 2012)

Selfhood is the basis of fundamental **negative rights**, not a sophisticated notion of personhood. This crucial recognition enabled the **advances in universal human rights** in the last decades, such as the rights of children and people with disabilities.

But sentient animals are selves too. We often fail to recognize they have **their own psychological lives**. Yet, each of these individual creatures can see, hear, taste, feel, remember, anticipate, recognize others and learn to fear or trust them. They can make friends. A sentient animal is **a who**, and **not a what**.

Arguments in favor of animal rights are **not based on religion or bad science**. Quite the opposite. They are grounded on the **best science available** (See [The Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness](#)).

Animal research, on the other hand, relies on very **old theological assumptions** ; such as human exceptionalism and human supremacy (which are two different, but related beliefs). **Human exceptionalism** is the idea that humans are essentially different from other animals. **Human supremacy** is the idea that humans are fundamentally superior to other animals and have dominion over them.

How can we still believe today that there is **a metaphysical gulf** between humans and animals and that they exist for our ends, as human supremacists believe?

Darwin has shown there are only **differences of degrees** between humans and other animals. Today, ethological research keeps bringing convincing evidence that other animals have rich **emotional, cognitive and social lives**.

What we are doing to lab animals is **unjust and morally wrong**. Harming **innocent and powerless creatures** because we **have the power to do it and benefit from it** is the opposite of justice and morality.

We do not believe, in human matters, that “**might is right**”. We don't think that powerful individuals can legitimately impose their will on the powerless – *even if it's all done for the benefit of others*.

I understand that researchers want to improve human lives and this is admirable, but **duties to help do not override duties not to harm others**. Not just some others we happen to like, but any other, anyone we are able to recognize as a self, as a vulnerable individual.

Human history is full of people with **good intentions** doing **awful things** to others they perceive as being somehow **inferior, worthless and sacrificeable**.

We are pretty bad at **seeing value in other's lives**, particularly when they live a life different from our own. This is especially true when we can benefit from their death.

To answer the questions asked to the panelists today:

*I believe that research involving animal subjects should follow the same general guidelines and oversight requirements as research involving human subjects (ex. young children unable to give informed consent).

*Invasive or deprivational research and experiments on captive animals should be for therapeutic purposes (i.e. to help the individual himself, not his species. This rules out the idea that animal experimentation is somehow justified because “nonhuman animals” as a general category would benefit from it).

*We need to be transparent about animal research on campus and create sanctuaries for animals who outlive their lab usefulness. Everything should be documented: where the animals come from, the kind of procedures they went through, so caretakers can take better care of them and so that we can **realize and remember** that **each of them** is an **individual who values his own life** as the most important thing in the world – even if this life seems insignificant to us.

Finally, I would like to end by saying that most of us **never made the conscious decision to harm, enslave and kill other sentient animals**. This was **chosen for us by past generations**. But each of us can **use critical thinking** to see the **injustices** that are **being done** and we can refuse to **further our academic career** by harming animals.

I understand it takes much **more courage** for **science students** than for **philosophy students** to oppose the longstanding metaphysical belief in human supremacy, but science students are **the ones who can change everything for these creatures** by choosing **other ways to advance knowledge**.

Violent and oppressive experimentation on sentient creatures with emotional, cognitive and social lives is something that, I think, **should belong to our past**.

Thank you for your attention!

Discussion points:

(1) On the « necessity » of animal experimentation

An action is only necessary relative to achieving a specific end or goal (Nobis, 2010). Animal experimentation is not causally “necessary” to advance scientific and medical knowledge broadly understood (it can be advanced by other means) and it is not necessary for medical training (there are highly competent physicians and medical personnel who did not train using animals). However, it can be true that research on animals (human or not) is necessary to advance a specific goal. But this doesn't show that it is morally permissible:

That an action is “necessary” to achieve a goal, even a very worthy goal, does not in itself imply that it is morally permissible. (Nobis, 2010).

Germans also thought it was necessary to subject Jews to experiment on hypothermia because German planes were shot down in the middle of the North Sea and flyers were dying of hypothermia. It was a moral duty to save their soldiers lives. The fact that an action is necessary to achieve a goal (even a worthy goal) doesn't imply that it is morally permissible.

As a general rule, *duties to help do not override duties not to harm others*. (Duties of beneficence are less stringent than duties of non-maleficence).

(2) On other possible criteria to discriminate animals (such as group membership)

Is it because these individuals belong to our community ? If so, why not use foreigners? We might argue that all humans belong to a “universal community” and that it is wrong to deprive fellow humans of their liberty, to put them in cages to experiment on them to improve the lives of others. But a community is not defined through biological features (belonging to a specific sex, race or species), but through relationships: our society is an **interspecies community**. Animals trapped in cages on McGill campus do belong to our community. They are here, somewhere, even if we don't see them. They are held captive, carefully hidden from view, making sure that they won't escape and won't appeal to our compassion and sense of justice.

(3) On animal agency and animal resistance

We are often caught up in a framework which allows us to only see sentient animals from the point of view of their instrumental value to us. Reading ethological and psychological research on these animals help to get a livelier sense of the subjective and intersubjective lives of these animals and stop seeing them as passive victims and come to see them as agents and subjects who live in their own meaningful world.

It is the only way to see what is wrong not only in pain and suffering, but in captivity and killing.

Animals are not collaborators, they have no choice and they do not consent. We just need to open a lab manual to realize it: it is full of information on how to prevent animals from biting and escaping. Animals are not only passive and vulnerable beings, but agents who resist our violence towards them.

The power we, as individuals, institutions and corporations, exercise over these beings is tyrannical. Their lives, their physical and psychological integrity and their freedom from captivity means almost nothing compare to our desire to increase our knowledge, our profits and our power. This is not ethics, this is not justice : it is tyranny.

(4) On Animal Consciousness

Given (1) evolutionary continuity, (2) behavioral evidence and (3) neurological evidence, there is no scientifically respectable way to deny that animal consciousness.

The [Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness](#) signed by many scientists stipulate that – given our actual knowledge – there are strong evidence to believe that other animals (at least mammals, birds and reptiles) are conscious beings experiencing affective states and capable of intentional behavior.

References and further information

Tom Regan, *The Case for Animal Rights* ([7 minutes video](#))

Gary Francione, *The Abolitionist Approach*

Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka, *Zoopolis. A Political Theory of Animal Rights* (Oxford University Press, 2011) (*Biennial Book prize at the Canadian Philosophical Association)

Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka, “[Do We Need a Political Theory of Animal Rights?](#)” (2012)

The [Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness](#)

[Maximum Tolerated Dose](#) (Award-winning documentary on animal experimentation from the point of view of people who participated in it and decided to walk away. The film charts the lives of both humans and non-humans who have experienced animal testing first-hand, with hauntingly honest testimony of scientists and lab technicians who's ethics demanded they choose a different path, as well as the simultaneously heartwarming and heartbreaking stories of animals who have seen both sides of the cage.” Directed by Karol Orzechowski : <http://maximumtolerateddose.org/>

For research on Empathy in Rats, see Ben-Ami Bartal, Decety and Mason (2011), « [Empathy and Pro-Social Behavior in Rats](#) », Science 9 December 2011: 334 (6061), 1427-1430.

[DOI:10.1126/science.1210789]: <http://www.sciencemag.org/content/334/6061/1427>

For more info on the Science of Animal Sentience, see the [Sentience Mosaic](#), a portal of research and online debates on animal consciousness and emotions in mammals, birds, reptiles, fish, etc.

Nobis, Nathan, “[The Harmful, Nontherapeutic Use of Animals in Research Is Morally Wrong](#)”, *The American Journal of the Medical Sciences*, 342, 4, October 2011.

Stop UBC Animal Research : <http://stopubcanimalresearch.org/>

Queen's Animal Defense Fund : <http://queensanimaldefence.org>

[Michael Allen Fox](#) is a philosopher who, after the publication of one of his book defending animal experimentation, changed his mind after being confronted to « *the arbitrariness of the patriarchal*,

hierarchical, human-centered ethical theory I had adopted and defended for so long, and had lacked the courage to examine fully »: « Since I wrote the book, I have come to be profoundly dissatisfied with the approach I took based on a narrow definition of the moral community. [...] There is no nonarbitrary ground on which to argue that the differences between humans and animals, morally relevant though some of them may be, make humans morally superior and animals inferior or valueless forms of life. » He acknowledge that the same type of arguments could justify sexism and racism. His book became « *an embarrassment* »: « *I now look at these arrogant remarks with dismay. How was it possible for someone of reasonable intelligence and sensitivity to hold these views?* » More info on [Frederic Côté-Boudreau's](#) blog.

Upcoming conference on animal research from a critical perspective : [Thinking Outside the Cage. Towards a Nonspeciesist Paradigm for Scientific Research](#) (Queen's University, Kingston, Canada March 27-28, 2014). Info : <http://www.outsidethecage.net/>

At the upcoming conference on [Critical Animal Studies](#) at McGill (28-30 March 2014) there will be a talk by Salomé Pollet on “*Alternative Methods to Animal Testing*” : <http://studentsforcriticalanimalstudies.wordpress.com>

More info : <http://christianebailey.com>