

Animal Rights with a Grain of Salt

Paul Waldau, *Animal Rights: What Everyone Needs to Know*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. 236 pp.

In a world like ours, where the overload of information has in many ways become a hindrance rather than an advantage, a book series with the slogan “What Everyone Needs to Know” should produce a shudder of suspicion. If, moreover, the contents fit in a couple hundred pages, the suspicion should redouble. One should probably either expect to find only the essentials of a topic with the details left aside, or an ocean of generalities trying to cover a bit of everything at the price of shallowness. This book fits the second category.

Waldau—a lecturer on animal law—claims at the beginning that his main objectives are to examine whether animals other than humans may be said to have rights, and in what sense—i.e., legal or moral. He underlines that it is the latter meaning of rights that is prior and more fundamental, and that this book will explain why. In practice, however, only a couple of pages are devoted to clarifying what moral rights are, what their connection to legal rights is, and what space they occupy in the context of morality as a whole. Regarding this latter point, there is a further problem. Waldau mentions, for example, that utilitarianism has been the most consistent ethical theory to defend sentient beings without using rights language, and that religions such as Jainism preach *ahimsa* (nonviolence) toward all living beings without ever mentioning rights. But on the whole the author seems to subsume all moral discourse on animals under the “rights” tag or, at the least, to treat morality toward animals and animal rights as if they were interchangeable expressions—a questionable assumption, to say the least.

When it comes to the philosophical arguments about the moral importance of animals, Waldau refers to the main points raised by utilitarianism, deontology, and virtue ethics, but hardly makes any references to the key names behind them. Regardless of whether or not one sympathizes with Peter Singer and the views expressed in *Animal Liberation*, his influence goes way beyond academic philosophy and cannot be dismissed. Here, however, Singer and his landmark book are barely mentioned. Tom Regan’s classic *Case for Animal Rights* does not fare much better, whereas other key positions such as abolitionism and ethical veganism are simply absent. (In truth, Singer and Regan do get one paragraph each in the chapter on major figures in the animal rights movement, but this is far from satisfactory, given their importance for what is purportedly the main subject of the book.)

By contrast, the author does a much better job of explaining the place of animals in the law and the evolution of legal rights toward them: from their consideration as mere property to a progressive, though still insufficient, acknowledgment that they may be protected for their own sake. The failures in animal legislation and especially litigation (with a focus on the United States) are well documented—among them, the relatively recent exemption of farm animals from the anticruelty laws enacted in the 19th century, and the exclusion of most research animals from the Animal Welfare Act.

Although the topics mentioned so far are more than enough for an introductory text on animal rights, in his attempt to cover all terrain Waldau then undertakes the Herculean labor of discussing animals in history and culture, politics and society, education, the professions, art, and the natural and social sciences . . . all in just over 200 pages. A fair amount of space is spent on platitudes—“The history of humans interacting with the living beings outside our own species is deep and broad” (p. 74) or “Companion animals are quite visible

in modern cities as humans exercise these animals” (p. 142)—and some sections lack substance altogether. The best example is the page-long answer to the question “What has been the role of the arts?” (p. 160). Except for a commonsensical comment on the influence of animals in dance, poetry, and painting, the remaining paragraphs are not even devoted to the arts, but to the 113 references to animals in the Old Testament, and to their importance for other sacred texts, such as the Qur’an and the Buddhist scriptures! There are also some downright out-of-nowhere comments, like the ode to family values that Waldau dedicates to the veterinarian Elizabeth Atwood Lawrence (1929-2003), who showed “how someone who cares about nonhuman animals can live a full, family-oriented life and still make a major contribution” (p. 79). Hello?

On the bright side, there are a lot of empirical data that will surprise or shock especially neophyte readers, like the estimated numbers of companion animals compared to those used for food and research. Some brief discussions make one yearn for more, like the opposition between animal studies and science, the evolution of laboratory practices, and the tactics of nascent fields such as animal law.

In terms of the form, Waldau’s having kept the chapters short makes the reading dynamic. However, it is as though at the last minute a mischievous gremlin had fooled with the table of contents, making some parts appear completely out of place. Just to mention some: the human and environmental risks of factory farming appear in the chapter “The Animals Themselves,” while the self-awareness, emotions, community life, and personality of the animals themselves does not appear under this heading but under the “Contemporary Sciences.” The character of octopuses gets discussed under “Other Animals in their Own Communities,” and religion does not get a delimited section but keeps reappearing under almost every heading, including philosophy, politics, culture, and (as was mentioned above) the arts. Finally, it is a shame that most of the quotes have no references attached, preventing curious readers who really want to know what they need to about animal rights to attain their goal.

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