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**Compassion and Animals:**

**How to foster respect for other animals in a world without justice**

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**Abstract:** The philosophy of animal rights is often characterized as an exclusively justice oriented approach to animal liberation that is unconcerned with, and moreover suspicious of, moral emotions, like sympathy, empathy, and compassion. I argue that the philosophy of animal rights can, and should, acknowledge that compassion plays an integral role in animal liberation discourse and theory.Because compassion motivates moral actors to relieve the serious injustices that other animals face, or, at the very least, compassion moves actors not to participate in or cause these injustices, the philosophy of animal rights can and should recognize both a duty to cultivate compassionate and a duty to promote compassion. Contra to feminist critiques of Regan’s justice-approach to ethics, the philosophy of animal rights is not committed to eschewing the moral emotions.

1. **Introduction**

The philosophy of animal rights is often characterized as an exclusively justice oriented approach to animal liberation, which is said to denigrate the moral emotions, like sympathy, empathy, and compassion. But reason, justice, and compassion, some argue, are intertwined in important ways, and compassion is especially useful when considerations of justice fail to motivate moral agents to treat other animals in accordance with morality’s demands. I argue that the philosophy of animal rights can, and should, acknowledge that compassion plays an important role in animal liberation discourse and theory. Because compassion motivates moral actors to relieve the serious harms that other animals face, or, at the very least, compassion moves actors not to participate in or cause these harms, the philosophy of animal rights can and should recognize both a duty to cultivate compassion for all sentient beings and a duty to promote compassion for other animals. Contra to feminist critiques of Tom Regan’s justice-approach to ethics, the philosophy of animal rights is not committed to eschewing all the moral emotions. Yet, as I will illustrate, this does not entail that compassion, or any emotion, should have an epistemic role in moral inquiry.

**II. Feminist Criticisms of the Philosophy of Animal Rights**

The justice-based approach to ethics and the emotion-based approach to ethics are said to be distinct, and competing, moral frameworks (Gilligan 1982 and Noddings 1984). Thomas Kelch notes that “emotions are thought to be unimportant in moral theory. It is a maxim of Western thought that one is to avoid contamination of moral theory with compassion, sympathy, or caring” (2007, 277). Western moral theory, which is grounded in concerns for justice, “attempts to banish appeals to feelings from moral argumentation,” says Grace Clement (2007, 303). We see evidence of this distrust of the emotions in the work of the two intellectual leaders of the animal liberation movement, Peter Singer and Tom Regan, who are reluctant to appeal to the emotions as they develop their animal liberation ethics. Both Regan and Singer advance a framework of justice for nonhuman animals, emphasizing equal and fair treatment of all animals (human and nonhuman). Perhaps their fundamental claim is that current attitudes and human treatment of nonhuman animals is inconsistent with valid and impartial moral principles. Neither Regan nor Singer appeal to the emotions in the development of their moral frameworks, and both suggest that it is insulting to characterize animal liberationists as sentimental or emotional. As Josephine Donovan (1990, 350) notes, Singer and Regan go to great lengths to dissociate themselves from a sentimentalist approach to animal liberation out of fear that the animal liberation movement would be trivialized if it is associated with the sentiments. For example, Singer (1975,iii) stresses *in Animal Liberation* that:

The portrayal of those who protest against cruelty to animals as sentimental, emotional “animal lovers” has had the effect of excluding the entire issue of our treatment of nonhuman animals from serious political and moral discussion…This book makes no sentimental appeals for sympathy toward “cute” animals…This book is an attempt to think through, carefully and consistently, the question of how we ought to treat nonhuman animals.

And in the preface to the first edition of *The Case*, Regan (1983, xii) writes:

Since all who work on behalf of the interests of animals are more than a little familiar with the tired charge of being “irrational,” “sentimental,” “emotional,” or worse, we can give the lie to these accusations only by making a concerted effort not to indulge our emotions or parade our sentiments. And that requires making a sustained commitment to rational inquiry.

Hence, both Regan and Singer are criticized by ethic-of-care feminists for allegedly suppressing and denying so-called emotional knowledge and advancing an exclusively justice oriented approach to animal liberation (Donovan 1990, 350; Clement 2007, 303). As Deborah Slicer (1991, 115) writes, the philosophy of animal rights fosters a “masculinist contempt for our emotions” and it encourages moral agents to “worship principles while neglecting such things as virtues and the affections” (1991, 113). For ethic-of-care feminists, emotions like sympathy, empathy, and compassion should be celebrated and not denigrated or excluded from serious moral inquiry, as they allegedly are by the philosophy of animal rights (Donovan 1993, 170).

Some critics of the Regan-Singer “rationalistic,” justice-based approach to animal liberation contend that the justice approach overlooks the supposed fact that animal defense activists are motivated by sympathy for animals, and not a concern for justice. As Brian Luke (2007, 132) argues, the justice approach offers arguments and rational principles that will neither motivate people to join the animal liberation movement nor help sustain the motivation and commitment of current activists. Marti Kheel (2007, 53) likewise suggests that “an appeal to…readers’ emotions and sympathies might be considered more relevant in an argument for moral vegetarianism than an appeal to reason.” Both Kheel and Luke assume that how people feel about other animals should be the primary consideration in the development of an animal liberation ethic. As they see it, an animal liberation ethic that emphasizes the importance of the emotions, like sympathy, will be more appealing to both current activists and the public, and thus a feelings-based approach to animal liberation is viewed as a more useful tool for garnering public support for animal liberation than a justice-based approach. Yet, others worry that many people don’t sympathize with animals, and thus they will be unpersuaded by appeals to sympathy. As Lekan (2004, 187). suggests, Luke doesn’t offer much evidence for the claim that humans have a natural propensity to sympathize with animal suffering to begin with. Singer (1975, 243) likewise remains unconvinced that “an appeal to sympathy and good heartedness alone will convince most people of the wrongness of speciesism.” After all, plenty of people do have sympathy for animals and still exploit them.

The assumption here seems to be that ethical theories and arguments ought to be attentive to the psychology of moral reasoning (Lekan 2004, 183). Yet, whether people have dispositions to feel for animals in certain ways seems irrelevant to the question of “what is the correct moral framework that moral agents ought to abide by?” Indeed, it would be erroneous to construct an ethical theory by asking: “what motivates human beings to act one way or another?” This question might be an important one for animal defense activists, if their aim is to minimize, or ideally eliminate, animal exploitation. After all, the foremost goal of animal defense activists is not to encourage the public to adhere to the “correct” ethical framework; rather, their primary concern is with encouraging the public to act in such a way that minimizes, or ideally eliminates, unjust harm to animals. Because of this, it is relevant and informative for activists to ask: what will motivate people to change their treatment of and attitudes towards nonhuman animals? But the answer to this question is not indicative of what is the correct moral framework. It might be the case that the public is more likely to embrace a plant-based diet if animal activists appeal to the health benefits of doing so, but it doesn’t follow that the correct moral theory is rooted in self-interest. We must thus keep distinct two questions that seemingly are often conflated in this discourse: what will garner support for animal liberation? And what is the correct moral theory about our treatment of animals? Moral theorists are concerned with the latter question, while animal defense activists are usually concerned with the former. Since this paper is about moral theory, and not effective animal defense activism, it, like most animal liberation theorists, is fundamentally concerned with the latter question.

**III. Problems with the “Feelings-based” Approach to Animal Ethics**

Other ethic-of-care feminists advance and defend an emotion-based approach to animal ethics not for pragmatic reasons as Luke does, but because they believe that “caring about and emotionally responding to this [animal] suffering can be appropriate sources of moral knowledge” (Adams 2007, 201). On this view, the emotions are said to play an epistemological role, in the sense that they are viewed as legitimate sources for moral decision making. As these ethics-of-care feminists maintain, it is good to embrace empathetic, emotional, and caring ways of knowing because doing so enables moral agents to make responsible moral decisions (Tong and Williams 2016). Because the emotions are viewed as a reliable basis for ethical decisions, it is assumed that they help moral agents understand the appropriate way to treat and interact with other animals in the various circumstances in which they find themselves.

In defense of an emotion-based approach to animal ethics, Kheel (2007, 46) contends that the limitations of rationality are apparent even in the rationalist approaches to animal liberation. As she argues, the common appeal to “intuitiveness” and “counter-intuitiveness” in the literature signal a recognition of non-rational thought. Donovan (1990, 350) shares Kheel’s concern, noting that “despite his accent on rigorously rational inquiry, Regan throughout uses the term *counterintuitive* as a kind of escape clause whenever deductive reason per se proves inadequate.” As Kheel (2007, 46) puts it, when it comes to initial, unproven premises, Regan relies on the *feelings* of readers to gain assent. Since even the “rationalist” animal liberation theorists allegedly appeal to human feelings when justifying certain moral judgments, Donovan and Kheel insist that we have good reason not to distrust or suppress emotions or feelings in moral inquiry. They moreover maintain that the emotions ought to play an epistemological role in moral inquiry, thus challenging the so-called masculine claim that a sound animal liberation ethic must be grounded in rationally derived principles and abstract rules.

Kheel and Donovan, however, fail to acknowledge that Regan is careful to insist that the only intuitions we ought to appeal to when forming moral judgments are *reflective* intuitions, which he describes as,

…those moral beliefs we hold after we have made a conscientious effort…to think about our beliefs coolly, rationally, impartially, with conceptual clarity, and with as much relevant information as we can reasonably acquire. The judgments we make after we have made this effort are not our ‘gut responses,’ nor are they merely expressions of what we happen to believe; they are our considered beliefs…. (Regan 1982, 134).

While Regan does appeal to *reflective* intuitions in the development of his animal liberation theory, he certainly does not appeal to emotion or even “gut feelings.” And it’s unwarranted to move from the claim that “reflective intuitions play a role in the evaluation of fundamental moral principles” to the claim that “the emotions should plan an epistemic role in moral inquiry,” as Kheel and Donovan seem to do.

 Other Regan-critics, like Clement (2007), likewise argue that feelings play a central role in Regan’s theory. After all, the starting point of Regan’s theory is the claim that all humans are entitled to full moral considerability, and this claim depends on a basic feeling about the importance of humans being, argues Clement (2007, 303).Yet, even if morality, as it pertains to our treatment of other humans, originates in the emotion or sentiments, and not rationality, it’s still arguably the case that morality, as it relates to our treatment of nonhuman animals, originates in rationality, and not in the emotions or sentiments. Most of us do feel positively toward humans, perhaps due to our upbringing in an anthropocentric society that normalizes human equality, and thus we stand ready to treat all human beings with respect, including the mentally disabled. Yet, given that society is infested with rampant speciesism, it is likely that even if we have any innate, positive feelings for other animals, they have been corrupted by speciesist culture and political influences, resulting in a tendency to *feel* that humans are superior to animals and that animals are the type of beings who can be exploited for human interests. As Elise Aaltola (2015, 39) warns, emotions can “overtake one’s conception of reality” by masking “evil as goodness,” especially when it comes to the inconvenient moral truth about the animals we exploit. Indeed, philosophy students commonly report a rational acceptance of the argument for animal equality, but they initially insist that it cannot be correct since they just *feel* that humans are superior to other animals. Once students understand that such feelings are misguided, they are in a position to change their harmful behaviors. And it is the impartial, rational argument against speciesism found in the rationalist animal liberation tradition that successfully challenges speciesist attitudes and feelings toward other animals. As Regan notes, our feelings are often mistaken because they stem from misguided beliefs (1995, 177). There is a process through which we come to realize that some of our feelings are based on prejudicial beliefs, and it is our capacity to reason that reveals this and subsequently prompts us to change these feelings.So, while our positive feelings for humanity can, and usually do, direct us to principles of equality and fairness in our search for an ethic for humans, it’s doubtful that our feelings for nonhuman animals will point us in the right direction when it comes to the development of an animal liberation ethic, as our feelings for others animals are often grounded in speciesist beliefs. It’s thus a moral imperative to employ our rational capacities, and set aside our emotions and feelings, as we develop an ethic for other animals that is untainted by speciesism.

A related issue with the ethics-of-care feminist position is this: when ethic-of-care feminists refer to “emotion-based” or “feelings-based” approaches to ethics, it is unclear to which emotions or feelings they refer. Emotions like empathy, sympathy, and compassion are often lumped together, despite the fact that these emotions differ in important ways. A failure to elucidate which emotions are allegedly relevant in moral inquiry does a disservice to the feelings-based approach, as some emotions are biased in nature, while other emotions, like compassion, are said to promote impartiality (Bloom 2016). The ethics-of-care insistence that we ought to use emotion in moral decision making is met justifiably with resistance, as doing so often leads to unfairness, given that we tend to have more intense emotional responses to those with whom we stand in a special relationship.

Take empathy, for example, which, according to Jesse Prinz (2011, 215), is often given a central place in sentimentalist theories of moral judgment. Paul Bloom defines emotional empathy as “[t]he process of experiencing the world as others do, or at least as you think they do” (Bloom 2014, 14).[[1]](#footnote-1) Empathy, according to Prinz (2011, 212), “requires a kind of emotional mimicry”; it essentially involves *sharing* emotions (Prinz 2011, 219). Someone with empathy for a person who suffers, to some degree, also suffers.[[2]](#footnote-2) Because emotional empathy involves feeling, to some degree, what another feels, empathy critics claim that it is biased insofar as we tend to feel greater empathy for those who are similar to ourselves, such as those who look like us and those who share our ethnic or national background, and for those who are more attractive (Ickes et al. 1990; Brown et al. 2006). Empathy critics likewise predict that empathy is subject to what Prinz calls the “cuteness effect bias” (Prinz 2011, 226). As Singer (2016) remarks, when it comes to feeling empathy for other animals, “[a]nimals with big round eyes, like baby seals, arouse more empathy than chickens, on whom we inflict vastly more suffering.”

Gruen points out that since empathy involves feeling another’s misfortunes, it “requires some engagement with and understanding of the circumstances of the other” (Gruen 2007, 338). Consequently, it is difficult to feel empathy for those to whom we are not close and for those whom we do not know. As Bloom puts it, empathy is *narrow*: “it connects us to particular individuals, real or imagined, but is insensitive to numerical differences and statistical data” (Bloom 2014, 15). This is not inconsequential because, as Prinz notes, this means that we cannot empathize with the majority of individuals who are need of our assistance (2011, 229). As he explains,

[E]mpathy is a response directed at individuals, and many of the most urgent moral events involve large numbers of people. We cannot empathize with a group, except by considering each member. The magnitude of some catastrophes is so large that it would be impossible to empathize with all the victims. And, if we could empathize with a large number, the agony of vicarious pain would cripple us into inaction. It is important to remember that death tolls are not just statistics—they involve real people—but empathizing with multitudes of victims is neither possible nor productive.

Likewise, the most urgent moral events involving nonhuman animals involve large numbers of animals. While we know that there are countless nonhuman animals who suffer seriously in our world, we cannot feel empathy for most of these individuals, as we do not know the specific details of every single animal’s plight. We might be able to empathize with the particular farmed animals whose faces and personal stories are featured in an intimate film about individual animals and their uniquely tragic stories, but it is impossible to empathize with the billions of other farmed animals living on Factory Farms, as we do not know their faces nor their particular circumstances. As Singer (2016) notes, when it comes to empathetic responses, “[o]ne death is tragedy; a million is a statistic.”

Given the biases and narrowness of empathy, it certainly is not an appropriate guide to moral decision making.[[3]](#footnote-3) After all, if we appeal to our empathetic responses in our moral deliberations about the treatment of animals (humans or nonhumans), we risk prioritizing unfairly those animals who are “cute” and those animals to whom we feel especially connected or attached, despite the fact that there are other animals who are in dire need of our moral attention. But just because empathy is not appropriate or helpful in moral inquiry does not mean that all emotions are similarly problematic. Indeed, there are at least some emotions that promote a fair and impartial concern for others. One such emotion is compassion, to which I now turn.

**IV. Cognitive Compassion: A Reliable Source of Moral Knowledge?**

Compassion is defined as an emotional response to the suffering or misfortunes of others (Snow 1993; Nussbaum 2003). According to Nancy Snow, compassion is an emotion that is a member of a larger family of emotions, such as pity, empathy, and grief. Compassion has three things in common with these emotions: (1) it is other-regarding, in the sense that the object of the emotion is not the self, (2) the object of the emotion is in a negative condition, (3) the perception of the one in a negative condition provokes a feeling of sorrow or suffering in the one who experiences the emotion (Snow 1993, 195-196). In addition to involving an emotional response to the misfortunes of others, compassion involves an affective experience of kindness or caring and a desire to alleviate another’s misfortunes (Klimecki and Singer 2015). One who feels compassion toward others not only cares about their misfortunes, but also is *motivated* to alleviate their pains, distress, and misfortunes.

Even though Western thought often portrays the emotions as irrational, there is a growing movement that recognizes that some emotions, including compassion, involve a cognitive process associated with beliefs. Snow explains that compassion is a composite of belief and affect; when one feels compassion, one necessarily has beliefs that accompanies the feeling, such as the belief that the object of compassion suffers a serious misfortune and does not deserve to suffer so (Snow 1991, 198). Martha Nussbaum likewise claims that philosophers are in general agreement that there are three judgments that accompany compassion:[[4]](#footnote-4)

1. *The judgment of seriousness*, which involves the thought that the object of compassion is “in a bad way, and a pretty seriously bad way.”
2. *The judgment of non-desert*, which involves the belief that the object of compassion does not deserve the misfortunes he suffers.
3. *The judgment of similar possibilities*, which involves the belief that “the suffering person shares vulnerabilities and possibilities with us” (Nussbaum 2003, 14-15).[[5]](#footnote-5)

It is thus said that there is both a cognitive and affective element involved in the emotion of compassion. Compassion involves feelings of care for others, the desire to relieve their misfortunes, *and* it involves evaluative propositions, such as beliefs of seriousness and non-desert. Important to note is that compassion involves *feeling for* and not *feeling with* individuals who face hardships, thus our feelings of compassion can be, and often are, directed toward those who are unattractive, those who are not members of our in-group, or those we do not know (Singer and Klimecki 2014). As Bloom (2016) adds, because compassion does not involve the mirroring or another’s suffering, it involves a more distanced concern for others. With compassion, it is possible to value the lives of others in the abstract, which means that compassion, unlike empathy, can be extended to distant others, such as victims of famine and disease or victims of animal exploitation (Bloom 2016).

At this point, one might argue that since compassion is neither narrow nor biased, our feelings of compassion should play an epistemic role in moral inquiry. I reject this view, primarily because a compassion-based account of ethics is uninformative in cases of moral conflict, and, as Regan might say, it “does not carry the weight of a theory of right action” (Regan 1985). For example, if I find myself with four other people on a boat with a carrying capacity of only four, appealing to my feelings of compassion can’t help me decide who, if anyone, should be thrown overboard. Indeed, if I were to take a compassion-approach to morality seriously, I would feel compassion equally for everyone on the boat, which would make it difficult, if not impossible, for me to know what to do in such a situation. Likewise, if I were to take a compassion-approach to morality seriously, I would feel compassion for both children who suffer from diseases and laboratory animals. How, then, do I decide if biomedical research is justified? Who should I show compassion to: the laboratory mice or the sick children? While, as I will argue, it is good to have compassion, appealing only to this emotion in moral deliberation will not answer every moral question.

Despite denying that the moral emotions play an epistemic role in moral decision making, even Regan himself acknowledges that “any fully credible ethic will have to find a place for both justice and care” (Regan 1995, 178). In what follows, I explain how compassion, which encompasses the notion of care that Regan has in mind, is part of the philosophy of animal rights. As I will argue, in order to be sufficiently motivated to act justly toward animals, one must have compassion for them. Consequently, the rights view should recognize a duty to be compassionate, which involves the requirements to care about the misfortunes of other animals and to be moved to alleviate these misfortunes. Both compassion and justice are necessary elements of a coherent theory of animal liberation; they can, and do, work together. Indeed, as I will illustrate, cultivating compassion for other animals is morally right.

**VI. Moral Motivation and Animal Exploiter’s Akrasia**

After reading articles on, discussing, and teaching the ethics of eating meat, some professional ethicists admit that although they rationally recognize that eating animals is wrong, they continue to consume animal flesh and animal product (Schwitzgebel and Rust 2014)). Elise Aaltola (2015) refers to this phenomenon as “omnivore’s akrasia,” whereby one rationally recognizes that eating animals is wrong, but still eats animals. The prevalence of omnivore’s akrasia in our society reveals the presence of “akratic breaks,” wherein “one rationally recognises that x is wrong, but still does x” (Aaltola 2015, 35). In what follows, I focus on what I will call “Animal Exploiter’s Akrasia (AEA),” which refers to the phenomenon wherein a moral actor rationally recognizes that she ought to act in accordance with the fundamental principles of the philosophy of animal rights by treating all animals justly, but she still continues to perform unjust acts, such as the act of buying animal flesh or the act of buying cosmetics that are tested on animals.

One might think that the source of AEA is simply the overwhelming desire to reap the benefits of animal exploitation. As Spinoza might say, we often find ourselves in akratic states because of Bondage, which he describes as the inability to control one’s passions. According to this view, akrasia occurs when moral agents succumb to their desires or passions, which are said to override their moral judgments. For instance, someone who experiences omnivore’s akrasia is said to understand and accept the arguments against eating meat, but is overtaken by lust for animal flesh. It might thus be assumed that the akratic omnivore “enters a type of madness” and “[i]t is in this state that she “sees better, but worse pursues” (Aaltola 2015, 43). As one too many professional ethicists admit readily, they recognize that it is wrong to eat animals, but they continue to do so because they are just “weak-willed.”

If those who suffer from AEA are just “weak-willed” and guilty of succumbing to their overwhelming desire for those things made possible by animal exploitation, then the solution must be for them to control their appetites. But arguably, the source of AEA is often deeper than an overpowering desire for hedonistic gratification. Aaltola (2016, 120) notes that it is often the case that people “harbour negative emotions (contempt, superiority, disgust) towards other animals,” and thus they are not moved seriously by their unjust fate, even when they recognize that it is rational to treat all animals justly. This seems especially true in the case of farmed animals, who are often viewed as dirty, stupid, uncharismatic, or devoid of feeling. Although not everyone feels outright disdain for nonhuman animals, many are apathetic when it comes to their unjust plights. While these apathetic persons might accept that some animals are wronged when they are exploited, their indifference towards other animals represses the motivation to adhere to moral principles that forbid moral agents from participating in animal exploitation.

These negative emotions and apathetic responses toward other animals arguably are not innate; rather, they are a product of the rampant speciesism throughout culture and society. While one might come to understand and accept the fundamental tenets of animal rights after studying the philosophical arguments, the resulting motivation to treat animals justly, if there is one, quickly dissipates once one leaves the academic environment and is immersed in a culture that not only normalizes speciesism and animal exploitation, but also denigrates other animals. As Aaltola (2015, 41) explains, “[c]ontempt, the sense of superiority, disgust, and other related muddling emotions are incited by the surrounding culture’s depictions of pigs, cows, chickens and fishes as passive, incapable, purchased products.” Within our society, farmed animals are viewed and identified as mere objects of consumption: pigs are just pork, cows are just beef, and chicken are just poultry. The fact that so few of us interact with farmed animals on a personal basis leads to an atmosphere of disconnect, which in turn produces a culture of indifference toward other animals, especially toward those whom we use for food. This culture of indifference, which Michael Fox refers to as “animal-insensitivity syndrome,” perpetuates indifference in individual moral actors, including those who rationally accept the principles of justice for other animals. As a recent psychological study indicates, if a person has a wavering commitment to a particular goal and is exposed to apathy, her motivation to pursue this goal is decreased (Pontus et al. 2014). It is often the case that, due to the widespread disconnect with other animals and speciesist upbringings, those who first learn about and rationally accept the philosophy of animal rights lack sufficient commitment to the goal of animal liberation. Consequently, when they observe that the majority of those in their society are indifferent to the plight of other animals, it’s not surprising that any motivation they have to treat animals justly quickly decreases, if it doesn’t altogether dissipate, once they leave ethics class.

Misleading emotions and apathy toward other animals, which are produced and reinforced by societal and cultural influences, deflect attention from what one believes to be morally good and causes one to act against rationally produced moral arguments regarding the treatment of nonhuman animals (Aaltola 2015). As Bankard (2015, 2328) notes, while “rational processes may direct the gaze toward the right or the good,” reason alone doesn’t provide enough, if any, “fuel for behavior.” Consequently, rationally endorsing a theory of justice for nonhuman animals does not guarantee that moral actors will treat other animals justly. Thus, we must ask, how does someone, after she’s formed the judgment that she ought to treat animals justly, come to have a sufficiently strong motivation such that she does in fact act in accordance with this judgment? How do we prevent “akratic-breaks” when it comes to our moral beliefs about and behavior towards other animals?

Philosophers and psychologists alike contend that our moral emotions motivate our behavior in ways that reason cannot (Bankard 2015, Kelch 2007). Singer (1994, 37) himself acknowledges that appeals to feelings can be effective “in bridging the gap between conviction and motivation-that is, in getting those who accept the argument to actually do something about it.” Likewise, Regan suspects that while “philosophy can lead the mind to water,” only emotion can “make it drink.”[[6]](#footnote-6) While both Regan and Singer insist that reason enables moral agents to discover the correct moral principles and to make good moral judgments, they both grant that the emotions play an instrumental role in *motivating* moral agents to act in accordance with these principles and judgments. Indeed, an overwhelming amount of research reveals that emotions, including compassion, pride, anger, and guilt, are highly motivating when it comes to moral conduct (Prinz 2011). A growing amount of research reveals that at least one emotion, compassion, facilitates moral motivation and promotes prosocial or altruistic behavior (Leiberg et al. 2011, Weng et al. 2013, Condon et al. 2013). In what follows, I argue that once moral agents come to accept principles of justice for other animals, compassion is necessary for motivating them to act in conformity with these principles.

**VII. Compassion’s Role in Animal Liberation Theory: The Duty to be Compassionate**

*Metta bhavana*, or loving-kindness practice, typically involves meditation-related techniques that foster feelings of benevolence and kindness for all beings, human and nonhuman, and recent studies conclude that even just a few weeks of this training fosters in its trainees the emotion of compassion, which in turn increases their prosocial or helping motivations (Singer and Klimecki 2014; Leiberg et al. 2011, Weng et al. 2013, Condon et al. 2013). This prosocial motivation is directed not only at those who are near and dear to the meditator, but it is also directed toward distant others and those who are members of various “out-groups,” such as those who are of a different sex, race, or species as the meditator. As Prinz (2011, 227) might say, compassion, unlike empathy, provides a “broad umbrella of moral concern.”

We need not even appeal to the recent scientific research on the positive impact of compassion training on moral motivation to understand that compassion plays a key motivating role when it comes to our moral conduct toward “the other,” including “uncharismatic” animals and animals whom we do not know, such as the billions of farmed animals living on factory farms. To understand the motivational force of compassion, just consider what compassion is. Compassion, as I’ve explained, involves both a feeling of concern for others and the desire to alleviate their misfortunes. So if moral agents cultivate compassion for all sentient beings, they will care about the misfortunes that other animals face and, perhaps more importantly, they will be motivated to relieve these misfortunes. At the very least, those with compassion for other animals will be motivated not to participate in or cause these misfortunes themselves. As is well and truly said by Marti Kheel, we must admit that we care before we can even talk about ethics in a meaningful way (2007, 48). And to be strongly motivated to act justly toward animals, moral agents must *care* about them, and they must have the desire to alleviate the injustices they face. After all, as Donovan and Adams (2007, 13) explain, “those who care about animals obviously do not destroy and consume them.”

Compassion is a key ingredient in the remedy for AEA because it combats the culturally and socially produced emotions, discussed in the previous section, which often instigate akratic breaks. Drawing on Spinoza’s account of akrasia, Aaltola (2015) highlights an overlooked distinction between internally and externally produced emotions. As she describes them, internally produced emotions originate from oneself and they “flow with reason, are enlightened by rational reflection” (Aaltola 2015, 40). They are, as she puts it, “reflected upon, influenced by our rational capacity” (Aaltola 2015, 40). Externally produced emotions, like disgust for animals, and apathy are caused by the external world. As Aaltola (2015, 40) explains, externally produced emotions “pacify us; we become their hapless targets, they pass through us without reflection,” often leading to “confusion” and “muddlement.” Compassion, I contend, is an internally produced emotion. Consequently, with the help of rational reflection, we can, through reflective training and conscious effort, cultivate this emotion within ourselves. And, in doing so, we will combat externally produced emotions, such as disgust, contempt, or apathy for animals, that paralyze us into inaction and perpetuate our willingness to participate in unjustifiable practices. After all, a sense of compassion for all animals will alter seriously how we feel toward other animals. When we feel compassion for another, we feel warmth, connection, concern, and care for that being. And through compassion training, we break down barriers between ourselves and other animals by expanding our scope of loving-kindness and allowing and encouraging ourselves to experience deeper feelings for and a connection with all beings with whom we share this world (Salzberg 1995).

Animal exploiting akratics are often aware that they lack a sufficiently strong motivation to treat animals justly when doing so requires that they make significant efforts, sacrifices, and lifestyle changes. Many admit willingly that although they rationally acknowledge the injustice of animal exploitation, they nevertheless will persist in their exploitative ways, such as by continuing to eat animal flesh. If moral agents are aware that they are indifferent toward other animals and that they are thus unlikely to reliably modify their exploitative conduct, they ought to foster a firm resolve to cultivate a caring attitude toward other animals and to generate the motivation to treat other animals in accordance with morality’s demands. This is all to say that it is a moral imperative that moral agents cultivate compassion for all animals. Essentially, compassion is a *perquisite* to being just towards nonhuman animals. And if we have a duty to act justly toward animals (human and nonhuman), as the philosophy of animal rights holds, it follows that we have a duty to fulfill the prerequisites of being just. Surely, a theory that “worships” principles of justice must demand that we do everything in our power to ensure that we do in fact act in accordance with the demands of justice. The duty to cultivate compassion is thus an implied duty insofar as it is a prerequisite to realizing principles of justice in our interactions with other animals. There’s a transitivity principle for compassion*: If moral agents have a duty to treat animals justly, and if being compassionate is necessary for moral agents to act justly, then moral agents also have a duty to cultivate compassion.* For reasons previously discussed, we can discharge effectively this duty by engaging regularly in compassion training, such as loving-kindness meditation practice.[[7]](#footnote-7)

**VI. Compassion’s Role in Animal Liberation Theory: The Duty to be Promote Compassion**

While the philosophy of animal rights notably implies that moral agents have a duty not treat animals (humans and nonhumans) unjustly, it also acknowledges a duty to assist victims of injustice, which demands that moral agents do everything in their power to minimize, and ideally eliminate, the injustices others face (Regan 1983, 249). Since moral actors need compassion in order to be sufficiently motivated to act in accordance with the judgment that “animals ought to be treated justly,” it follows that we have a duty to promote compassion. Because people are more likely to refrain from participating in animal exploitation if they feel compassion for animals, moral agents can best discharge their duty to assist nonhuman victims of injustice by encouraging others to cultivate compassion for all sentient beings, whether it be by promoting some form of loving-kindness training, or by demanding that school curriculums encompass humane education.

Engaging in humane or moral education is an imperative in our speciesist, human-dominated world that numbs any innate disposition we might have to be compassionate towards other animals. Some animal defense activists and intellectuals have already connected the dots between compassion and the moral obligation to assist animals who are treated unjustly. For example, in 1991, Jane Goodall founded the Roots and Shoots program, which has a mission to “foster respect and compassion for all living things, to promote understanding of all cultures and beliefs, and to inspire each individual to take action to make the world a better place for people, other animals, and the environment” (Jane Goodall’s Roots and Shoots 2017). Others, such as Marc Bekoff, have taken the initiative to bring this program into jails and prisons, creating “an opportunity for inmates to rewild with nature” (Bekoff 2014, 132). Bekoff predicts that by teaching others how to bond and connect (or re-connect) with nature and other animals, they can “connect with values that they otherwise likely wouldn’t have” (Bekoff 2016). He explains that rewilding education falls under the umbrella of *humane education*, which “focuses on teaching moral intelligence and reverence for all life…[i]t strongly encourages coexistence, compassion, and peaceful relationships among all beings” (Bekoff 2014, 130).

Our society normalizes speciesism by insulating individuals from the suffering that animals endure when they are exploited and by signaling that other animals are mere objects for human consumption. To combat the normalization of speciesism in our quest to assist other animals who are treated unjustly, we need to not only expose the serious harms of animal exploitation, but we also need a paradigm shift in how moral agents view other animals and how moral agents *feel* towards them. Moral agents need to *feel* compassion for other animals, such that they understand the scope of the undeserved suffering of nonhuman animals, feel a sense of kindness or care in response to this understanding, and are moreover motivated to put an end to this undeserved, human-caused suffering. This paradigm shift will only occur through compassion training and humane education that fosters a sense of connection with and concern for all animals and inspires moral actors to convert their moral beliefs into practical action. Thus, in discharging the duty to assist other animals who are treated unjustly, moral agents must recognize the moral imperative of spreading, encouraging, and teaching compassion. The philosophy of animal rights should demand no less.

**VII. Conclusion**

A satisfactory approach to animal ethics must acknowledge the integral role of compassion in animal liberation, including the duty to cultivate compassion and the duty to promote compassion for all animals. Justice and compassion are not dichotomous elements of moral theory; we can talk about the motivational relevance of compassion in the animal liberation discourse, while still acknowledging that we ought to use rationality to discover the correct moral principles of justice that ought to guide us in moral deliberation. As I’ve argued, a world without compassion is a world without justice.

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1. Emotional empathy is distinct from cognitive empathy. Cognitive empathy, which is akin to social intelligence, social cognition, and mind reading, refers to the understanding of another’s suffering. Someone with cognitive empathy, and not emotional empathy, understands that another is in pain without experiencing or feeling the pain (Bloom 2016, 17). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. When an empathizer experiences what another experiences, the empathizer’s experiences are likely weaker in degree. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The emotion of sympathy is also met with skepticism. As Lori Gruen notes, it“has the potential for being condescending, or paternailistc… one can sympathize with another when sympathy isn’t called for” (Gruen 2007, 338). Sympathy is closely related to pity, and as Snow notes, “[p]ity includes a stance of superiority toward the object of emotion that is often expressed in condescension” (1991, 196). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Nussbaum also holds that there is a fourth judgment needed to make an account of compassion complete, which is not mentioned in the tradition: *The eudaimonistic judgment*, which is “a judgment that places the suffering person or persons among the important parts of the life of the person who feels the emotion” (Nussbaum 2003, 15). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Nussbaum suspects that the judgment of similar possibilities is not strictly necessary for compassion. After all, as she points out, “[w]e have compassion for nonhuman animals, without basing it on any imagined similarity - although, of course, we need somehow to make sense of their predicament as serious and bad” (Nussbaum 2003, 15). Snow (1993), however, argues that there is a basis for imaginative identification between the one who experiences compassion and a nonhuman target. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Gary Francione (1996), *Rain Without Thunder* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press), at pg. 6 (quoting Tom Regan). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For readers interested in pursuing loving-kindness training, a good place to start is with Sharon Salzberg’s (1995) book titled *Loving Kindness*, which provides a number of compassion-focused meditation exercises that can be used on a daily basis, in the comfort of one’s home. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)