Review of: *A Rat Is a Pig Is a Dog Is a Boy: The Human Cost of the Animal Rights Movement* (Wesley Smith, Encounter Books, 2010, 312 pp.) first appeared in *Liberty*, September 2010.

To paraphrase George Orwell, there are some ideas so absurd that only intellectuals can believe them. Certainly one of the most absurd ideas that are widespread among today’s intellectuals is the notion that animals have rights. Since the public, to the extent that it’s

even aware of the animal rights movement, usually misunderstands it, Wesley Smith’s new book explaining this movement and its costs to society is most welcome.

Smith is a senior fellow in human rights and bioethics at the Discovery Institute. He has written several other books broadly within the realm of bioethics.

Smith starts this book by surveying and contrasting the views of the intellectuals behind the animal rights movement. They include Gary Francione, Richard Ryder, Charles Patterson, Tom Regan, and, most notably, Peter Singer, the philosopher who wrote the seminal work in this area, *Animal Liberation*, in 1975. Singer is credited with popularizing the notion of “speciesism” that equates preferring the human species to preferring one’s own race. Singer is a utilitarian, so as Smith rightly notes, he doesn’t base his views on natural rights as such. His call for animal liberation proceeds, instead, from the notion that animals can feel pain and pleasure so should be considered in the calculus of pleasures and pains that determine (in his view) right and wrong actions. What Smith doesn’t note is that Singer’s philosophical take on animals harks back to one of the earliest exponents of utilitarian ethics, Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832), and that Bentham’s most acute follower rejected it. I will return to this point.

Smith also discusses the worldwide efforts to give animals legal rights. On the national scene, law professors such as Steven Wise and the Center for Expansion of Fundamental Rights come in for considerable scrutiny, as do such famous legal authorities as Cass Sunstein and Lawrence Tribe. All have sought to give legal standing to animals in the courts. But (a point Smith doesn’t explore) none of these worthies has seen one of the obvious results of giving animals legal rights logically—it opens the way for animals to be arrested for victimizing other animals and for animals to sue other animals. If a mouse has legal standing to sue people in a court of law, why shouldn’t it be allowed to sue any cat that attacks it or see the cat stand trial for assault?

Smith covers the actions of animal rights groups such as PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) and HSUS (the Humane Society of the United States). They have used some unsavory and even despicable tactics to sway public opinion, including the operation of grossly misleading propaganda campaigns (such as the notorious PETA campaign equating the cooking of chickens by Kentucky Fried Chicken with the killing of millions of people in the Holocaust). They have had no scruples about pushing propaganda in the public schools. Other groups have infiltrated medical labs to destroy research and “liberate” the animals.

The book reviews in detail the animal rights terrorist groups such as ALF (the Animal Liberation Front), ELF (the Earth Liberation Front), and SHAC (Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty). These groups have committed grave crimes and caused great harm, but they have received a lot of direct and indirect support from members of so-called moderate groups.

Perhaps the most useful feature of the book is its explanation and defense of the use of animals in medical research. The usual specious arguments against this practice put forward by the animal rights activists (that animals aren’t physiologically analogous to humans, that computer modeling can always replace experimentation, and so on) are refuted. Smith reviews in detail the evolution of our testing procedures, including the development of protections for lab animals by the medical and pharmaceutical industries. Especially useful has been a private nonprofit organization AAALAC (the Association for Assessment and Accreditation of Laboratory Animal Care International). In a supplement to the book, Smith provides a table of nearly seventy-five entries of Nobel Prizes awarded for research conducted using animals.

Working from the natural rights ethical perspective, Smith gives a compelling account of why animals don’t have rights. Essentially, they don’t have rights because they cannot enter into the realm of rights (i.e., the community of morally autonomous, rights-recognizing individuals). Animals cannot recognize any rights in humans or any other animals. Only humans can—which is why we don’t try, say, a bear for attacking a tourist. We may kill it to prevent further attacks, but no one but a madman would blame it. The bear views us as simply part of the environment.

To the common reply by animal rights supporters that many humans (such as infants and the mentally impaired) are similarly incapable of recognizing rights, Smith rightly responds that they are still members of the rights community, because they have the potential to recognize other peoples’ rights in the future or did so in the past or because even though they are diminished in mental abilities, they are still capable of recognizing rights. This moral autonomy is just part of being human. I would add that when humans—such as violent criminals—show no recognition of the rights of others, we colloquially call them animals and incarcerate or even execute them.

My only criticism of the book is that it attempts to explain why the animal rights ideology is unsound from solely the natural rights ethical framework. In truth, the ideology can be seen as morally dubious from almost any ethical perspective. Consider the utilitarian view. Even from the hedonistic utilitarian perspective, the ideology can be criticized for equating the pleasures that a pig can experience with the pleasures that a person can experience. John Stuart Mill, the protégé of Bentham, took precisely this tack. Or we can just drop hedonism entirely, which many later utilitarians did, and say that other things besides pleasure—artistic achievement, scientific knowledge, literature, and so on—are inherently desirable. From that utilitarian perspective, one can easily hold that animals are not on the same moral plane as people.

Again, an ethics that puts the focus of morality on autonomous deliberative choice would tend to view animals as being of different moral status from true persons. Similarly, virtue ethics—which views the rational, trained control of emotions as being central to ethics—would likely put animals in a different category from humans.

Smith is to be thanked for giving us a concise but comprehensive survey of the ideas, thinkers, advocacy organizations, and terrorist groups responsible for making an aberrational ideology as influential as it has been and for showing just how detrimental to human flourishing its further empowerment would be.

**Gary James Jason**

**Department of Philosophy**

**California State University, Fullerton**