

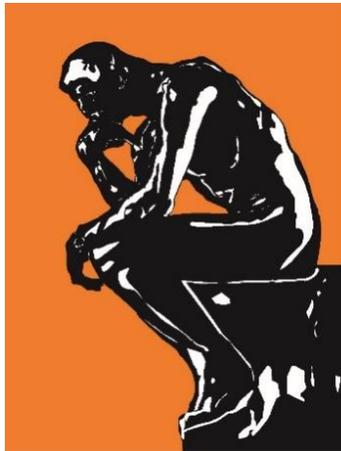
Is there a solution to the moral dilemma between animal consciousness and human survival?

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“The problem of a problem solver is his inability to define the problem.”

—In *Meandering Sobriety* (2023a)

Abstract

On April 19, 2024, the New York Declaration on Animal Consciousness was announced at the “Emerging Science of Animal Consciousness” conference held at New York University. The New York Declaration is an effort to showcase a scientific consensus on the presence of conscious experiences across all vertebrates (including reptiles, amphibians, and fish) and many invertebrates (at least including cephalopods, decapod crustaceans, and insects). Scientifically, the New York Declaration marks a significant advancement for humanity. However, it also brings heightened awareness to the moral challenges associated with animals that have conscious experiences (or phenomenal consciousness). This article will discuss philosophical approaches to the moral issue of killing sentient beings, thereby highlighting an existing moral dilemma in human society: In sustaining human survival, a species considered to have morality, we have to violate our own moral standards by killing other species with intrinsic value, consciousness, or sentience. This moral dilemma has long been present in human society. Various solutions have been proposed and implemented in practice to address this issue, such as the non-violence and vegetarian approach of Buddhism, the application of Islamic law and sacred rituals to animals in Islam, animal rights movements and voluntary extinction in Western countries, and the technology producing meat using animal cells. However, despite these approaches, we have not yet been able to fully resolve the dilemma, as sentient beings continue to be killed for our survival. We believe the most feasible solution is to change the current food consumption culture, build an eco-surplus culture to mitigate climate change, prevent deforestation, and promote peace.

Keywords: morality; human survival; phenomenal consciousness; Buddhism; Islam; animal right; voluntary extinction; Deep Ecology; food consumption culture; climate change

The New York Declaration: A major step forward in animal consciousness

On April 19, 2024, the New York Declaration on Animal Consciousness was announced at the “Emerging Science of Animal Consciousness” conference held at New York University. This Declaration was endorsed by 39 experts in psychology, neuroscience, ethology, and philosophy, led by philosopher and cognitive scientist Kristin Andrews (York University), philosopher and environmental scientist Jeff Sebo (New York University), and philosopher Jonathan Birch (London School of Economics and Political Science).

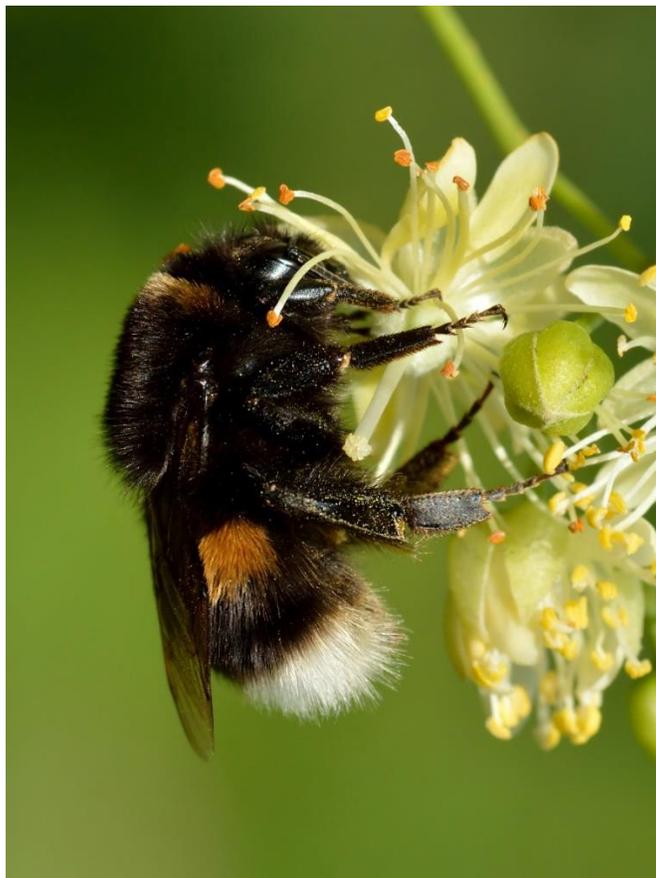
The New York Declaration aims to update the earlier Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness in 2012, which was an effort to represent a scientific consensus on the existence of consciousness in non-human animals, including but not limited to mammals and birds. The New York Declaration states (Falk, 2024):

“The empirical evidence indicates at least a realistic possibility of conscious experience in all vertebrates (including all reptiles, amphibians and fishes) and many

invertebrates (including, at minimum, cephalopod mollusks, decapod crustaceans and insects).”

The Declaration focuses on the most basic type of consciousness, known as phenomenal consciousness. In simple terms, an organism with phenomenal consciousness can feel basic sensations such as pain, pleasure, or hunger, but it might not possess more complex mental states, such as self-awareness (Falk, 2024).

For example, recent evidence has shown that octopuses (*Octopus vulgaris*) perceive pain and can engage in complex behaviors such as problem-solving, tool use, and play (Crook, 2021; Richter et al., 2016). Meanwhile, cuttlefish (*Sepia officinalis*) can remember specific past events (Billard et al., 2020); cleaner wrasse (*Labroides dimidiatus*) show evidence of passing a version of the “mirror test,” indicating a certain level of self-awareness (Kohda et al., 2019); zebrafish (*Danio rerio*) exhibit signs of curiosity (Franks et al., 2023). In the insect world, bumblebees (*Bombus terrestris*) also engage in playful behavior (Dona et al., 2022), while fruit flies (*Drosophilidae*) have different sleep patterns affected by their social environment (Niki et al., 2023). Meanwhile, crayfish (*Procambarus clarkii*) exhibit states akin to anxiety because of social harassment, which can be altered by anti-anxiety medications (Bacqué-Cazenave et al., 2017).



Bumblebee (*Bombus terrestris*). Taken by Ivar Leidus (CC-BY-SA-4.0)

Despite the different brain and nervous system structures between these animals and humans, researchers argue that this does not necessarily preclude consciousness. For instance, a bee's brain contains about a million neurons, compared to about 86 billion in humans (Chittka & Niven, 2009). However, each bee neuron might be structurally more complex. The network connections they form are extremely dense, with each neuron potentially interacting with about 10,000 to 100,000 others (Falk, 2024). On the other hand, the octopus's nervous system is complex in a different way. Its structure is more dispersed rather than centralized; a severed arm can exhibit many of the behaviors of the intact animal (Falk, 2024; Richter et al., 2016).

The moral dilemma between killing sentient beings and human survival

Scientifically, the New York Declaration represents a significant advancement for humanity as it opens new limits in human cognition about the world around us, particularly regarding animals with consciousness, commonly called sentient beings. This forms the basis for scientific discoveries about cognition and biomimetic techniques and helps guide societal transitions towards more civilized and environmentally harmonious approaches (Nguyen et al., 2023). However, the Declaration also makes us more aware of the moral challenges related to animals with conscious experiences. In other words, this Declaration will cause many of us to reevaluate our values, behaviors, and treatment of "conscious" animal species around us.

Many aspects differentiate humans from animal species. Besides biological characteristics, cognitive abilities, social structure, and culture, the capacity for ethics and moral reasoning is a fundamental distinguishing sign.

In most moral frameworks, including but not limited to religious and philosophical doctrines, killing is considered morally wrong. In philosophy, both deontological ethics and utilitarianism generally argue that, in most cases, killing is wrong (Tannsjo, 2015). Deontological ethics argue that killing is wrong because it uses a person as a means to an end, thus not respecting the intrinsic value (dignity) of a person as a rational being. Additionally, if such an act became a universal law, it would lead to a society full of disorder, insecurity, distrust, and lack of social cooperation. While utilitarianism argues that killing might be morally acceptable if the act's outcome helps maximize total happiness and minimize total suffering, most acts of killing are still seen as wrong. This is because such an act deprives the victim of potential future happiness without any compensating benefits to others or due to negative impacts on others relevant to the victim (Tannsjo, 2015).

In his book "The Ethics of Killing: Problems at the Margins of Life", McMahan distinguishes two realms of ethics: the morality of respect and the morality of interest (McMahan, 2002). Specifically, the morality of respect is applied to subjects McMahan (2002) considers "persons". This realm of morality reflects constraints in an individual's actions towards others, stemming from recognizing them as mature individuals with equal moral standing. In

other words, he argues that killing is wrong because a person has their own value created from their awareness of self, recognition of identity, and continuous existence over time. Meanwhile, the morality of interest argues that an act is right or wrong based on its impact on the happiness, welfare, or relative benefits over time of others (Quinn, 1984). This realm of morality is applied to subjects McMahan considers “nonperson” or who do not meet the criteria for continuous cognitive awareness of their existence, such as fetuses, infants, and those with severe cognitive impairments.

However, all three philosophical explanations are seen as unsuccessful in explaining the wrongness of killing (Ebert, 2016). At the same time, utilitarianism might create too many reasons to justify killing, failing to account for deeply held and common moral notions about different degrees of wrongness related to killing and offering a mistaken argument for why killing is wrong. The deontological approach and McMahan’s ethical theory both set arbitrary boundaries and lack an empirical basis, making them unsuitable for indicating the difference in moral status between subjects below and above these boundaries.

Therefore, Ebert (2016) suggests that the wrongness of killing should be explained by the intrinsic value of consciousness (or dignity of subjectivity). In other words, killing is wrong for subjects capable of phenomenal consciousness because it fails to respect the intrinsic value of an experiencing subject. Through this approach, reasons why normally killing an adult human is wrong could also apply to many other animal species and individuals who do not reach the cognitive level of an adult human. Additionally, this approach also indicates that justifying the killing of animals with phenomenal consciousness is no easier than justifying the killing of a human.

The New York Declaration is a step forward following the Cambridge Declaration, expanding the range of non-human animals with phenomenal consciousness. At the same time, it also raises societal awareness about the existence of consciousness in many more species than the previous Declaration. Along with that, the foundations of philosophy, including but not limited to Ebert (2016) approach, have developed to the extent that they believe that subjects with phenomenal consciousness should be respected. As these philosophical values emerge and are widely disseminated in the information space of society, they have the potential to be embraced and become part of many people’s worldviews (Nguyen et al., 2023; Vuong, 2023b; Vuong et al., 2022). When that happens, the following ethical dilemma will widely emerge:

- To maintain the survival of humans, a species considered to have morality, we have to violate our own moral standards by killing other species with phenomenal consciousness.

Is there a solution to this moral dilemma?

This moral dilemma has existed for a long time in society and has led to several notable environmental movements. The Animal Rights Movement has long emerged and views animal abuse as a social issue on par with harming children, women, and older people. They

operate under the principle that animals are sentient beings rather than ‘objects’ to be seen as goods, food, research tools, or hunting trophies (Munro, 2012). Thus, the Animal Rights Movement emphasizes the sentient beings’ ability to experience pain and suffering to promote “the sacred rights of the weak”, thereby promoting animal welfare, animal liberation, and animal rights (Clark, 1995; Munro, 2012). Philosophers such as Singer (2004) and Regan (2013) are key figures behind this movement.

Although not directly mentioning the rights of living beings, the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement (VHEMT) also clearly demonstrates the moral conflict between the existence of humans and nature, including other beings. The movement, initiated by Les U. Knight, an American environmental activist, in 1991 (Jarvis, 1994), argues that “The more humans there are [on Earth], the greater those problems will be” (Savory, 2008). The foundation of this movement is based on the argument that the human population has exceeded the Earth’s carrying capacity, making voluntary human extinction the best measure for the happiness of other species populations (Keck, 2007). Therefore, those with this mindset support voluntarily stopping reproduction, ultimately leading to the extinction of the human species (Ormrod, 2011).

The Animal Rights Movement and the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement borrow some principles from the Deep Ecology. This environmental philosophy emerged in the early 1970s as a reaction to the increasingly severe environmental crises and represents a critique of narrow approaches to environmental protection (Naess, 1973). Arne Naess, a Norwegian philosopher who introduced Deep Ecology, argues that we should not focus on the special position of humans in nature, but instead, we should care about all components of nature on an equal basis because the natural order has an intrinsic value greater than human values (Aaltola, 2010; Naess & Sessions, 1984). Identifying with Naess’s perspective, supporters of Deep Ecology value the intrinsic value of all living entities and ecosystems, supporting measures such as population reduction and lifestyle changes to reduce human impact on the environment (Smith, 2014).

However, the view that living entities and ecosystems have intrinsic value, consciousness, or sentience has existed for thousands of years and has been conveyed in various forms through religious and cultural systems. One of the sources of ideas for the Deep Ecology doctrine is the metaphysical principles of Buddhism (Sessions, 1987).

Buddhism began to spread in northeastern India through the teachings of Buddha around the 6th and 4th centuries BCE. The Four Noble Truths are foundational in Buddhist thought. The first truth (*duḥkha*) is the reality of suffering. The early teachings discussed suffering in many aspects, from physical pain to complex psychological states related to connection and loss (such as sadness, crying, suffering, or not achieving what one wants). Regarding the ethical conduct (*śīla*) of Buddhism, one of the precepts taught by Buddha is non-violence (*ahiṃsā*), interpreted as the advice not to kill or harm others because it will create suffering. “Others” here is used to refer to sentient beings, including animals with emotions (Finnigan,

2017). Since animals have conscious experiences and can undergo suffering, killing them will cause them to experience suffering, which is considered morally wrong in Buddhism (Getz, 2004).

Another major religion with its own ethical system for animals is Islam, the second-largest religion in the world, originating in the early 7th century AD in Mecca. This religion believes that animals are creatures dependent on God (Allah); hence, they have their own intrinsic values. Specifically, animals are considered to have their own lives and purposes, which are valuable to themselves and to Allah more than any material value they might provide to humans (Rahman, 2017). Therefore, humans must care for various animal species' health and living conditions. When killing animals for food, the act of slaughter must be performed in the name of God as a sacred ritual to ensure that the animal's life is not taken lightly and that the act of slaughter is not a manifestation of hostility towards the universe (Chao, 2022). Islamic law is very strict in the humane treatment of animals. Killing animals for meat and skin by the *halāl* method (i.e., based on a set of ethical and religious standards) is mandatory. If animals have been mistreated during transport and slaughter, their meat is considered impure and illegal for Muslims to eat (*Makrooh*). Even if these animals have been slaughtered in a thoroughly Islamic way, if other cruel acts have been committed against them, their meat is still forbidden food (*Haram*) (Rahman, 2017).

It can be seen that the moral dilemma of killing sentient species with intrinsic value, consciousness, or sentience to maintain human survival has existed for a very long time. Approaches to addressing the dilemma are also very diverse and varied. While the West has seen movements demanding rights for animals and implementing voluntary extinction, Buddhist followers choose non-violence and vegetarianism, and Muslims adhere to Islamic law and perform sacred rituals. However, regardless of the approach, we have not yet been able to fully solve the dilemma, i.e., sentient beings continue to be killed for human survival, a species considered different from other beings, because of the ethical and moral systems that consider killing sentient beings wrong. Perhaps, with the development of science and technology, the industry of processing meat using animal cells might help somewhat address this moral dilemma in the future. However, there are still doubts remaining (Mello-Klein, 2022).

One thing that can be certain is that if we change the current food consumption culture, it will help reduce the number of sentient beings killed, not only because the number of sentient beings raised for meat decreases but also because the number of beings killed due to climate change and deforestation declines. Millions or even billions of terrestrial animals have been killed by extreme events induced by climate change, with anthropogenic activities being the main cause. Due to only the forest fires caused by increasingly high temperatures and frequent droughts in the wetland of Pantanal, Brazil, at least 16.952 million vertebrate animals have died, not to mention other indirect damages caused by forest fires (Tomas et al., 2021).

The global food system is one of the main factors generating greenhouse gas emissions. According to calculations by Xu et al. (2021), the global food production system (such as using agricultural machinery, spraying fertilizers, and transporting products) generates approximately 17.3 billion tons of greenhouse gas emissions annually. In this, food production from animals accounts for 57% of emissions, twice the emissions caused by food production from plants. Beef is the item that contributes the most to the emissions generated by food production from animals, accounting for 25% of the total emissions from food production activities. Additionally, expanding pastureland for livestock is the cause of 41% of the area of tropical forests being destroyed (Ritchie, 2021).

Therefore, from the moral perspective of any philosophical school, culture, or religion, changing the food consumption culture to reduce meat consumption is the right conduct (Nguyen & Jones, 2022a; Vuong, 2021). We propose promoting a societal transition away from eco-deficit values and behaviors (e.g., promoting beef consumption, eating bushmeat, using products from rare animals, etc.) and building eco-surplus cultural values in the public (e.g., reducing the proportion of meat in the diet, not using meat consumption for social and cultural goals, contributing to animal conservation funds, etc.) (Nguyen & Jones, 2022b; Vuong & Nguyen, 2024). Improving the connection between people and other sentient beings needs to be promoted through communication channels, education, and information. Demonstrating animals through the perspective of humans and social activities can also help people be more familiar and sympathetic to sentient animals, leveraging the human-animal connection (Vuong, 2022; Vuong & Nguyen, 2024). This connection will be the foundation leading to people's empathy, which will help them more easily embrace humane values containing the value of environmental sustainability and animal loving (Vuong & Nguyen, 2023).

In addition, all the arguments above will have little impact if humans continue to wage wars and spend money and lives to massacre each other based on the dangerous idea that "truth belongs to the strong" (Vuong et al., 2024). Because moral statements about animals will not be able to reach the necessary moral threshold since "humans will always be at the top of the food chain".

In summary, as long as we have not yet fully resolved the moral dilemma, the best solution is to make our best effort to minimize immoral behaviors.

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