
Andrew Linzey’s animal-centered research program is fascinating, unique, and important, and *Why Animal Suffering Matters* makes a significant contribution to that program. The book is philosophically sophisticated without being excessively abstruse. It also engages in a serious way with what Christian thinkers and holy texts have said about animals, but without appearing relevant only to those who are committed Christians. It will thus appeal to a very wide range of readers. Now, when I think or write about how we ought to treat animals, I am not much concerned with what any religion (religious holy text, religious figure, etc.) says about animals, because I believe there are extremely serious problems with trying to glean moral knowledge from religion. And I believe most other professional philosophers are like me in this respect. However, when the average person thinks about what morality demands, she or he is interested to know what religion has to say; and more people count themselves as Christian than as adherents to any other single religion. Thus, Linzey’s work will likely speak to many people in a way that the thoroughly secularized work of most philosophers will not. For this reason, when a friend or family member who knows of my animal-related research interests or of my eschewal of meat asks me to recommend reading about animal ethics, *Why Animal Suffering Matters* will henceforth frequently be among the first things I suggest; and at least parts of it will also get a workout in courses I teach.

In just the first chapter, Linzey engages with a stunningly wide range of sources. This includes: historical figures such as Aristotle, Aquinas, Hobbes, Samuel Pufendorf (a 17th-century German jurist and political philosopher), Humphry Primatt (an 18th-century Anglican divine), and John Henry Newman (a 19th-century vicar of St. Mary’s University Church, Oxford); more contemporary figures like C. S. Lewis, E. L. Mascall, Peter Singer, Tom Regan, Noam Chomsky, Michael Leahy, Gillian Clark, Paul Badham, Guunlaugur A. Jónsson, and David J. A. Clines; and also the Bible and documents such as the World Medical Assembly’s 1964 Declaration of Helsinki, and the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child. In doing so, Linzey considers, and rejects, a number of putative reasons for “discounting” animal suffering, i.e., for counting animals’ suffering as less bad, morally, than the same suffering would be if it were experienced by humans. These are that animals are: (i) naturally slaves; (ii) non-rational beings; (iii) linguistically deficient; (iv) not moral agents; (v) soulless; and (vi) devoid of the divine image. Linzey explains the shortcomings of these reasons without trying to erase the differences between animals and humans. For example, he believes that “humans have some ‘metaphysical privilege’ over animals”—though he stresses that “Christians of all people cannot claim that they are unrelated to fellow creatures” because “we are all creatures of the same Creator; our life (*nephesh*) is God-given and, in both cases, the work of the Spirit” (p. 33). Nor does Linzey argue that the differences between animals and humans are morally irrelevant. Instead, he tries to reconfigure the differences. “Some differences,” he says, “do have moral relevance but in an entirely contrary way to that supposed by their proponents” (p. 10). The differences between human adults and human children make the infliction of suffering on children harder, not easier, to justify; and, Linzey argues, the differences between animals and adult humans work in the same way. The reconfiguring involves recognizing that animals: (a) cannot give or withhold their consent; (b) cannot represent or vocalize their own interests; (c) are morally innocent; and (d) are
vulnerable and defenseless. And, at the end of the book, Linzey maintains that by tying together the reasons that special solicitude is due to infants and to animals, his approach is one that answers “the worst slander on animal advocates—that our cause represents not an expansion but a narrowing of human sympathy” (p. 154).

While the first chapter is the book’s heart, the second chapter, titled “How We Can Minimize Suffering and How We Can Change,” is also important. It has two aims: “to identify and illustrate… intellectual mechanisms that prevent us from recognising sentience in animals or that help to limit its significance,” and “to consider ways in which animal abuse is socially perpetuated through the phenomenon called ‘institutionalisation’” (p. 43). These first two chapters constitute Part I of the book, which is titled “Making the Rational Case.” Part II is called “Three Practical Critiques,” and contains chapters titled “Hunting With Dogs,” “Fur Farming,” and “Commercial Sealing.” And then there is a brief sixth chapter simply titled “Conclusion,” in which Linzey summarizes his case, explains what he takes its uniqueness to consist in, and tries to answer a number of criticisms.

Linzey’s book is a treat. It is written in a smooth and accessible style, and his arguments are, on the whole, lucid and powerful. That said, however, I have a number of concerns—though to Linzey’s credit, most of these are ones that he has anticipated and to which he has tried to respond.

First, what I take to be the most serious argument in support of discounting is one that Linzey rejects too quickly. According to this argument, animals’ pain is not “objectively” less important—less important, say, from the perspective of the universe. But, the argument continues, we do not and should not live life from that impartial perspective. A stranger’s pain is not “objectively” less important than my brother’s, but I would be something of a monster if, in my moral deliberation, I gave no more weight to my brother’s pain than I gave to the stranger’s. Now, accounting for the extra strength of my obligation to my brother is difficult, but I am not convinced that it could be grounded only in my sentimental attachment to my brother or in a duty I have to repay kindness he has shown me. If it is not grounded in either of these, then it is possible that whatever exactly it is grounded in also makes it the case that we ought to give more consideration to humans’ pain than to animals’. Now, this argument may well fail – and, for what it is worth, I believe it does – but I believe it merits more than the two pages worth of attention Linzey gives it. In order to demonstrate why it fails, it is not enough simply to insist, as Linzey does, that “we need an impartial perspective in order to judge competing claims” (p. 33), or that a departure from that perspective amounts to mere sentimentality.

Second, it is unfortunate that Linzey focuses to such a large degree on animal suffering and to such a relatively small degree on animal life and death. One might, for example, be fully convinced that animal suffering is morally on a par with human suffering, and for this reason eschew eating meat from factory farms, where animal suffering is abundant. But this same person might wonder whether there is anything morally wrong with those much rarer but not altogether unheard of farms where animals live a pleasant life, but are nonetheless killed for food. An account of why animal suffering matters does not answer this question. Instead, we need to know whether animals have, say, an interest in living that is violated when they are painlessly killed in the prime of their life, whether such killing violates their rights, and so on. Linzey answers this criticism by saying that his book, “while highlighting the specific issue of suffering, does nothing to discourage respect for sentient life in general” (p. 160). He also says he believes that animals have rights, and he acknowledges several advantages to rights talk, including that it makes clear that obligations to animals are demands of justice. Even so, Linzey says, “It is a mistake to think that rights language is, as it were, the philosopher’s stone in terms of correct argumentation, so that no argument can be valid unless is somehow issues in rights
claims”; and he adds that “the considerations at the heart of this book are complementary to a
rights perspective” (p. 162). He may be correct about all this, but it does not convince me that his
book would not be better, ceteris paribus, if it were not so myopically focused on suffering.

Third, in a number of places Linzey’s argument does not seem as empirically well
informed as it could be. Linzey objects to those who say that animals’ suffering matters less than
humans’ because animals are non-rational beings, or linguistically deficient, or not moral agents;
but his reply more or less accepts the premise that animals are indeed different from humans in
these respects. (As noted earlier, he tries to reconfigure the moral relevance of these differences.)
However, Linzey ignores a great deal of evidence suggesting that not all animals are in fact so
different from humans. Research shows that animals of various kinds: solve problems via insight
(as opposed to via mere trial and error); make and use mental maps; make and use tools; possess
concepts (of, e.g., color, shape, number, and even non-existence); feel “moral” emotions such as
guilt, shame, and pride; recognize themselves in mirrors; and can understand ways in which
word order affects a sentence’s meaning. Findings of these sorts are mostly ignored by Linzey.
He defends himself by saying that it is a virtue of his argument that it does not “ask people to
revise the commonly held differences between animals and humans” and does not “depend upon
some privileged access to new scientific findings” (p. 165). He adds that “the case for animals
may, and probably will, be buttressed by the further questioning of at least some of the
differences that are now widely accepted” (p. 165). I would have thought, however, that findings
of the sort I have pointed to would threaten his attempt to relate the solicitude due to animals to
the solicitude due to infants.

Finally, in reading through the three practical critiques, it is hard to avoid thinking that
Linzey has taken the easy way out by talking about practices to which most people are already
opposed. It would have been more bold to address meat-eating, animal experimentation, and
hunting in general (as opposed to just to hunting with dogs), and there would in these cases have
been much more potential for influencing people’s behavior. Linzey answers by saying that “the
three cases in this book are by no means uncontroversial and cumulatively affect millions of
animals” (p. 155). True enough; but as Linzey himself acknowledges, “these numbers are not
huge, if we compare them with, say, the millions, if not billions, of farm animals slaughtered
every year” (p. 155). (And, for what it is worth, everything I have read suggests that a
conservative estimate of the number of land animals alone that are killed worldwide each year
would be 50 billion!) Thus, Linzey adds that “the issue isn’t just about numbers” (p. 155), and
that seems correct; but whatever else it is about presumably shows up in just as clear and serious
a manner vis-à-vis eating meat from factory farms as it does vis-à-vis commercial sealing. The
difference is simply that arguing, as Linzey does, against the latter is easier because most people
are already disposed to reject commercial sealing as immoral.

In the end, though, these criticisms are mostly just quibbles. Why Animal Suffering
Matters matters. It is a smart, sensitive book from which academics and non-academics,
philosophers and non-philosophers, the religious and the non-religious, and those with passionate
and casual interests in animals, all will benefit. Animals suffer undeservedly. In turn, one thing
they certainly deserve is to have as thoughtful and compassionate an advocate as Andrew
Linzey.

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