

BETWEEN THE SPECIES

Tom Regan:
A Visionary Changing the World

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The human mind is remarkable for its ability to see the world in bits and pieces, each part disconnected from the rest, like an expansive vista viewed through the narrow slits of a picket fence.

—Professor Tom Regan

Professor Tom Regan and his wife, Nancy have never been your “typical” animal rights activists. In fact, Tom worked as a butcher in his early years before he started asking himself questions about the lives (and deaths) of other animals. Neither Tom nor Nancy would fit into “counterculture mould”; radical hippies they are not. Educated in Philosophy, with keen interest in ethics, Professor Regan developed his views about animal rights after long and careful study, pouring over arcane theories and working for hours, even days, just to get one sentence in a book or essay exactly right. But thinking, thinking and thinking, as a professional philosopher would do, about all the complex details and ramifications of rights for all animals (and not only the human kind), he came to the only conclusion that seemed possible:

If human beings have Rights which protect some of their interests, then other beings with whom we share this planet have such rights too.

Unlike his consequentialist peers, Regan isn't fundamentally concerned with what does the most good, or with what saves the most from suffering. Rather, in keeping with his deontological roots, he's concerned with what is due to us, what others are obligated to do or not do - to and for us. His rights-based approach to ethics follows in the tradition of the great 18th century philosopher Immanuel Kant and acknowledges the contributions of thinkers such as G. E. Moore (who Regan has

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written about extensively) as well as John Stuart Mill and Regan's contemporary Peter Singer.

Rights, when considered as something that we, as individuals, possess, are not uncontroversial. That is, there are those, like Singer, who are sceptical that such things as rights even exist. But in the parlance of our modern world we are used to the notion, even if philosophers will debate each other endlessly over the idea. We talk easily and often about basic human rights: the right to be free from bodily harm, the right to be left alone in one's home, the right to basic freedoms – personal as well as political. No matter how philosophers would cash these concepts out, most of us would agree that, for example, we each have a right not to be unjustly killed. We would probably all agree that even if many other people would be better off if some innocent person were killed, innocent people have a right not to be killed. Rights act as a barrier against the harms that others may want to inflict upon us. When we have a right not to be killed, then all others are obligated to respect that right.

So, what about other animals? In his landmark work, *The Case for Animal Rights*, completed in 1982, Professor Regan tried to settle just what it is about us – as living creatures – that would entitle us to such rights. What he discovered, and what makes his contribution to the animal rights debate both original and still powerfully influential, is that what entitles human beings to rights also must entitle at least some other kinds of living beings to some of those same rights.

Tom and his family suffered the tragic loss of their dog, Gleco, in 1972. Faced with this incalculable loss, and having spent considerable time as a Professor of Philosophy thinking about the teachings of Gandhi and pacifism, Tom started also think-

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ing about the ethical arguments against the eating of other animals. Tom said of that time: “The rational arguments seemed to be there. My head had begun to grasp a moral truth that required a change in behaviour.” Tom realized that his powerful feelings for Gleco ought to include all dogs; in fact, why not all other animals? “Wherever in the world there is life that feels, a being whose welfare can be affected by what we do (or fail to do), there love and compassion, justice and protection must find a home.”

Nancy understood this too. They both awoke one day to the realization that they had to stop eating animals. The challenge before Regan now was to make the grounds for accepting the rational argument for animal rights more compelling. It wasn't enough for Nancy and him to change; he saw that the world needed to change. That was what Regan tasked himself with for the rest of his life.

What is his rationale for animal rights? Regan begins by arguing that we, as human beings, have dignity. Those who have dignity are those who Tom believes “have a biography, and not just a biology.” You might say that what happens to them matters to them, regardless of whether it matters to anyone else. Human beings therefore are each the “subject of their own life” and not an object for the use of anyone else. Because of that, we deserve respect and the rights which protect it.

However, as hard as he looked, Regan could not find anything uniquely human that could be the ground for or cause of our dignity. Rather, what he found was that there is a constellation of qualities or attributes that taken together form the basis of our dignity, what some might call our “humanity.” We have memories, the capacity to suffer, the ability to love and

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be loved; we have desires, wants and needs – not just urges or drives; we have autonomy. But on this planet we are not alone in this constellation of qualities and attributes. As Regan sees it, and argues compellingly for, many other animals are “subjects-of-a-life” as well. Surely we can see that the Great Apes aren’t simple brutes with no desires, no memories, no plans about tomorrow. When we look into their eyes we don’t see just “something” staring blankly back – we feel *someone* looking into our eyes, trying to find us just as we are searching for them. But, on Regan’s view, it’s not just our closest cousins who are subjects-of-a-life.

Tom and Nancy saw someone in the eyes of Gleco, and when Gleco died they lost a member of their family, not a possession they owned. Gleco was a subject-of-a-life, and that life belonged to Gleco. It would be just as wrong to take Gleco’s life as it would be to take the life of an innocent human being. And that is Regan’s great insight. He saw that all mammals are subjects-of-a-life who have dignity and are worthy of respect. As his views developed and as the scientific evidence grew during the 40-plus years that he studied these matters, he came to believe that birds and at least some sea-dwelling creatures are also subjects-of-a-life who deserve our respect.

Regan wrote many books and essays about animal rights, on activism and the animal rights movement, but he will be most remembered for the seminal work *The Case for Animal Rights* (1983). Completed after more than a decade of intense thinking about the rights of other animals *The Case for Animal Rights* was truly ground-breaking, changing forever the terms of the debate about other animals. It was the first and still one of the very best analytical treatments of the issue. While not everyone is satisfied with the answers Professor Regan developed,

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no one doubts the keen curiosity, intellectual honesty or complete sincerity with which he sought them. It was and remains a fundamental text for the Animal Rights movement.

The publication of *The Case for Animal Rights* opened doors for Regan. Invitations to present lectures, to give speeches and to explain his work increased. Tom took this opportunity to represent the animal rights movement in a way that few had done so well before him – as a movement of thinkers, of thoughtful, compassionate humans who are willing to reflect on their best efforts and work hard to change the world. Regan believed that his fate was to help humans view other animals in a different way – as individuals, as the subjects of their own lives.

But Regan was more than just an Animal Rights philosopher, he was a person who never forgot his early work on Human Rights and who remained committed to compassion and justice throughout his life. He lived his philosophy, showing great respect for all human beings, especially those with whom he had personal dealings. Regan possessed a quiet grace and displayed - even when he spoke with those he absolutely disagreed - what can only be described, most fittingly, as dignity

Regan is widely known as “The Philosophical Leader of the Animal Rights Movement” for good reason. He changed forever the terms of the debate about other animals. He presented us with a rigorous exploration of rights in general and of why, if we apply those rights to humans, they ought to be applied to other animals as well. Controversies remain, and Professor Regan’s lifelong work had really only just begun when he died recently. But he gave the world a solid argument for why we owe each other respect, and through his unique contribution to

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the animal rights debate, why “each other” includes not only the human animals, but animals other than humans as well.