

BETWEEN THE SPECIES

Review: Animals, Political Liberalism
and Public Reason, by Federico
Zuolo (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020)

Authored by Federico Zuolo

Palgrave Macmillan, 2020

287 pages, hardback

JOSH MILBURN
Loughborough University

Volume 25, Issue 1

Winter 2022

<http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/bts/>

JOSH MILBURN

How should liberal states respond to disagreement about animals? A particular view about animals could be imposed. For example, states could enforce animal rights. But, argues Federico Zuolo, such imposition fails to respect people holding different views. After all, he says, there is not merely disagreement, but *reasonable* disagreement, about animals' status. Though some widely held views about animals are inconsistent with science or logic, disagreement between other views – despite the best efforts of conscientious, informed individuals – has been found irresolvable. States need some procedure to draw policies out of this disagreement.

Zuolo's proposed procedure is an account of public reason firmly in the tradition of John Rawls; that is, Zuolo seeks a procedure offering results that all who hold any of the 'admissible' views about animals will consider justified. Admissible substantive views include a range of positions from abolitionist animal rights through to environmentalism and humanism – not included are (among others) certain religious views. On Zuolo's account, for a particular policy to be favoured, it must be supported by neutral reasons (reasons endorsable independently of any substantive view about animals) *and* for reasons internal to each substantive view.

When this procedure is applied, Zuolo argues, we reach agreement on an animal-welfare principle: 'We ought to minimize animal suffering in interactions with human beings as much as reasonably possible'. We reach no conclusive result concerning animal imprisonment and animal killing. Decisions about policies on these matters must be made democratically, as a second-best option.

JOSH MILBURN

This is perhaps a book primarily written for those invested in post-Rawlsian debates about public reason, rather than those interested in animals. Nonetheless, animal ethicists will be drawn to the resources found in ‘public reason’ for labeling certain views – anti-animal and otherwise – inadmissible. And the result of the procedure, favouring an ethic of animal welfare, may be of interest. That said, the result ends up vague: Zuolo (deliberately) does not expand on what his principle means for different uses of animals, and nor does he tell us how much weight animal welfare must be given in decision-making.

Animals, Political Liberalism and Public Reason has many scholarly merits. Zuolo is well-versed in discussions about public reason and about animals. His arguments are firmly scaffolded by engagement with existing positions on public reason, and the differences between his view and existing views are meticulously explained and justified. And he gives a (more or less) fair hearing to a range of different views about the moral status of animals. But this fair hearing is given within the context of the proposed procedure of public reason. And it is not clear that those who care about animals should accept this procedure – it is not clear that, in Zuolo’s terms, they should be ‘reasonable’.

Public justification, Zuolo argues, rests upon two ‘fixed points’: ‘personhood and reasonableness’ (78). Personhood means that ‘human beings possessing the capacities for moral agency ... possess moral rights’ (79-80). This does not mean that non-persons do *not* have rights. That is an open question. But it does mean that non-persons do not need exercises of power to be justified to them. It is only persons to whom justification is owed.

JOSH MILBURN

A reasonable person, meanwhile, has ‘a disposition to find a common solution that would be acceptable to all’ (83) – but to all *other persons*. It does not have to be acceptable to non-persons. On the other hand, it is *unreasonable* for persons to ‘try to impose their views on others’ (83) – by which Zuolo means on *other persons*, as imposing one’s views on non-persons is potentially entirely ‘reasonable’. It does not matter if an animal would rather not be killed or disfigured, it is (*prima facie*) reasonable to impose this upon her.

Now, Zuolo would say that reasonable people would not kill or disfigure animals *if* the procedure of public reason, which every reasonable person accepts, concludes that it is wrong to do so. But there are two problems with this.

First, that is not what the procedure concludes, according to Zuolo. It reaches no conclusion about killing animals. And disfigurement is permissible provided any suffering is ‘minimised’ as much as ‘reasonably possible’. What is ‘reasonably possible’ depends on what is ‘technologically possible’ given ‘standard social practice’, and, in any case, suffering reduction must be ‘balanced with other, more or less important goals’ (212). My guess, then, is that Zuolo would reject arguments that we should minimise unnecessary animal suffering by (say) abolishing animal farming. Instead, he would probably argue that the ‘standard social practice[s]’ of (intensive) animal agriculture and its associated horrors are permissible, provided suffering is ‘minimised’ when doing so is ‘possible’ (within the confines of the ‘practice’). But only if it is not too onerous (e.g., not too expensive). If this is a win for animals, it is a very small one. (One can only guess, incidentally, what Zuolo’s procedure concludes about *human* non-persons, including infants.)

JOSH MILBURN

Second, it is only if we begin with the assumption that animals do not matter in politics that Zuolo's procedure makes sense – that it makes sense to think that our policies need to be justified only to (some) humans. And it is bizarre to propose a procedure resting upon animals' exclusion in a book at pains to stress its 'neutral' approach to the question of animals' status. Imagine a parallel book called *Women, Political Liberalism and Public Reason*. How might we feel if it championed a procedure resting on the ideas that men have rights, and that reasonable men will try to reach an agreement with other men about how women should be treated – but that left women's rights an open question, and excluded women's views?

If we are serious about thinking through animals' place in politics, perhaps we need 'a *new* form of reasonableness', according to which views not sufficiently respectful of animals are deemed unreasonable (Cochrane 2018, 104). Though he engages with works in which this possibility is endorsed, Zuolo does not address it. One wonders why.

Acknowledgements

I thank Zuolo for being good enough to send me a physical copy of *Animals, Political Liberalism and Public Reason* – despite, I suspect, anticipating criticism. This review was written while I was based at the University of Sheffield, funded by the British Academy (PF19\100101). I give thanks to my funder, host institution, and mentor (Alasdair Cochrane).

References:

Cochrane, Alasdair. 2018. *Sentientist Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.