

BETWEEN THE SPECIES

Review of
*Saving Animals, Saving Ourselves:
Why Animals Matter for
Pandemics, Climate Change,
and Other Catastrophes*

Jeff Sebo
Oxford University Press, 2022
xvii + 249 pages, hardcover

ANGUS TAYLOR
University of Victoria, British Columbia

Volume 26, Issue 1

Summer 2023

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

ANGUS TAYLOR

The impact of human beings on the planet's ecosystems has become so great that we are commonly said to have entered a new geological epoch: the Anthropocene. We humans are responsible for much of the enormous disruption and harm to other sentient beings throughout the world, harm that is inextricably linked in feedback loops with climate change, pandemics, and other major problems. "The Anthropocene," writes Jeff Sebo, "complicates the distinction between natural harm and human-caused harm, and, as a result, it also complicates the distinction between the duty to prevent harm and the duty to merely avoid causing harm" (2–3). In light of this, he argues that humans have a moral responsibility to prevent, reduce, or repair nonhuman suffering and death as much as we reasonably can.

Sentient (nonhuman) animals count morally as individuals. Our responsibility to save them from harm, argues Sebo, involves both refraining from imposing harm directly and supporting their abilities to live full lives. But we also must save animals in order to save ourselves, given the ways that our exploitation of animals and ecosystems is harming humans – including through climate change, biodiversity loss, soil erosion, water pollution, and disease.

Sebo does a remarkable job of exploring the complex web of connections that bind humans, animals, and other life on this planet. The subject of his study is at once complex and complicated: complex because of the very many aspects involved, which cannot be understood in isolation from each other, and complicated because getting a purchase on things in order to know how to proceed can be very difficult. It's everything, everywhere, all at once. Sebo repeatedly notes how much we don't know about many of these issues. For example,

ANGUS TAYLOR

in addressing the issue of how we are to assess the interests of animals, he says: “Indeed, when we combine our uncertainty about well-being and moral status with our uncertainty about other relevant moral and practical issues, we might discover that we face more than uncertainty in this context. We face cluelessness” (157). Such an admission is refreshing, if frustrating; Sebo is simply trying to tell it like it is.

Sebo does not adopt one conventional ethical lens. Rather, he opts for a “shared moral framework”, seeing in two prominent ethical views – utilitarianism and rights theory – sufficient convergence on general parameters to enable considerable progress. First, according to this unified perspective, we have a duty to help animals as much as we reasonably can, even while, within limits, devoting time and resources to our own projects and relationships. And second, we have a moral duty to avoid harming and killing animals unnecessarily, though having the moral right to harm or kill animals in some circumstances. Sebo focuses on utilitarianism and rights theory but notes that aspects of at least some other ethical theories might fit this shared framework. I am reminded here of the “platform principles” of the deep ecology movement – a concise set of basic principles articulated with the hope of uniting the commitments of environmentalists holding diverse philosophical and religious views.

Sebo repeatedly emphasizes the need to think *holistically* and *structurally*: holistically because by dealing with problems in isolation we risk simply replacing one harm with another one, or even worsening overall outcomes; and structurally because to be effective in the long run we must get at the systemic roots of problems.

ANGUS TAYLOR

Sebo recognizes that it is impossible to live without doing any harm. Even vegan diets involve some harm. What Sebo wants us to aim for, as he has said, is to live with “minimally dirty” hands. He argues (what animal protectionists of all stripes would accept) that we are morally required not to harm animals unnecessarily. The devil, of course, is in the details. Some harms can be morally justified, and may even be morally required, as in cases of self-defense, other-defense, unintended harm, or the sufficiently greater good. Sebo makes the point that we should aim to dissolve conflicts and trade-offs, to the extent possible, through holistic and structural changes. He is optimistic that changing social, political, and economic systems can go a long way to mitigate or eliminate conflicts. Yet he is clear-eyed in recognizing that some conflicts will remain that will on occasion require harming some animals.

An understandable reaction by the reader to the daunting complicated complexity that Sebo reveals might be despair at the magnitude of the task. But Sebo refuses to give in to despair. Kendra Coulter describes Sebo’s stance as one of “pragmatic optimism”, combining as it does a realistic understanding of the challenges with a stubborn commitment to action. Douglas Kysar refers to Sebo’s “pragmatic radicalism”: calling for changes that have the possibility of being implemented in the short term and that lay the groundwork for more effective further changes. (Sebo et al. 2022)

Sebo recognizes that building the kind of multispecies, multinational, multigenerational society he wants us to aim for will require very significant social, political, and economic change. At a minimum it will require major revisions to our current understandings of liberalism, democracy, and capitalism; perhaps it will require even more radical change, such as an outright

ANGUS TAYLOR

end to capitalism. But while recognizing the significant limits of our current knowledge and the limits of what is practicable in current circumstances, he insists we must act now, to the best of our ability, to reduce our exploitation of animals and give them positive support, laying the groundwork for further and deeper change later on.

Capitalism, we might say, is more than just the elephant in the room; it is the room and the air in the room. The structural imperatives that make industrial capitalism so dynamic and productive also make breaking their grip in order to restructure society particularly difficult. If the tendency of capitalism is to frustrate human agency by turning people into cogs in the economic machinery, how much worse the plight of animals is. All the more need, then, for pragmatic optimism and pragmatic radicalism.

It is perhaps a naive faith on the part of philosophers to imagine that the world will pay much attention to what they write. I am sometimes tempted to think that a good vegan restaurant does more for the cause of animal protection than any work of philosophy. But then academic philosophy surely has played a significant role in initiating and shaping the movement for animal protection, even if change in society is messy and the course of change unpredictable. What can be said is that the task of reshaping the world is not one that can succeed without many kinds of contributions – philosophical, activist, culinary, and otherwise – from many people in many walks of life.

With its seemingly endless, meticulous enumeration of the interconnected dimensions of the issues facing us and its refusal to offer tidy answers, I would not call this book a propulsive page-turner. But precisely because it lays out those issues

ANGUS TAYLOR

so comprehensively and impresses on us the urgency of addressing them, it makes a real contribution to understanding the problem of saving animals and ourselves.

Reference

Sebo, Jeff, et al. 2022. Book Launch Panel: *Saving Animals, Saving Ourselves*. <https://as.nyu.edu/departments/environment/events/spring2022/jeff-sebo-book-launch.html>