

Alasdair Cochrane

Sentientist Politics: A Theory of Global Inter-Species Justice

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Alasdair Cochrane's *Sentientist Politics* is an audacious work. Among the vanguard of a relatively small number of philosophers and political theorists spearheading the so-called 'political turn' in animal ethics, Cochrane sustains a persuasive, unrepentant, book-length argument for a 'political system dedicated to the sentience of animals', a *sentientist cosmopolitan democracy*. '[U]topian in its ambitions' (p. 13), *Sentientist Politics* carefully and methodically argues for a number of politically unorthodox positions, including (a) that all sentient beings are moral equals with moral rights; (b) that if (a) is true, then the rights of all sentient beings ought to shape the aims and structures of politics; and (c) that wild animals are owed both negative duties of protection *and* positive duties of assistance.

For the uninitiated, *sentience* as a term of art in the animal ethics literature refers to those conscious experiences with an attractive or aversive quality, for example, pain and pleasure, suffering, anxiety, fear, etc. Sentience plays a central role in Peter Singer's pioneering *Animal Liberation* (1975). Echoing Singer, Cochrane argues in chapter 2 that because they are sentient, nonhuman animals have interests and intrinsic moral worth; they 'are concerned with how their own lives are going ... they have a stake in their own fates' (p. 15). Such interests mandate equal consideration, giving 'equal weight in our moral deliberations to the like interests of all those affected by our actions' (Singer, 2011: 20). According to Singer, it follows that *all sentient beings are moral equals*.

Employing a utilitarian moral framework, Singer's view allows for (and in some cases, demands) the subordination of individual interests to the maximisation of the interest-satisfaction of all sentient beings as a whole. Cochrane rejects Singer's utilitarianism for failing to respect the intrinsic moral worth of discrete sentient beings. He favours instead a rights approach that centres ultimate value in sentient *individuals* rather than in aggregates of individuals as mere 'receptacles of value' (p. 26), protecting individual interests through constraints that ordinarily trump appeals to the general welfare. Cochrane specifies two fundamental sentient rights, namely, the right to life, and the right not to be made to suffer. For Cochrane, sentientist rights are *moral rights* akin to human rights.

While most animal rights theorists since the publication of *Animal Liberation* have taken these kinds of conclusions to require modifications primarily in individual ethical behaviour (e.g., obligatory veganism), those in the political turn press us to take claims of animal rights to their logical political conclusions. Cochrane contends that if we take seriously the implications of

his arguments for an interest-based theory of animal rights, then humans ‘have a moral duty to create and maintain political institutions dedicated to the interests of all sentient creatures’ (p. 114). Only collectively – through political institutions – can we fulfil our duties to animals, protect and secure their basic rights, and adjudicate in an official capacity inevitable conflicts of interest between and within shared human and animal communities. Chapters 3 and 4 lay out Cochrane’s arguments for why these ends are best achieved within a political system that is both *democratic* (through participative, deliberative and representative institutions), and *cosmopolitan*, ‘comprised of overlapping local, national, regional, and global [inter-species] communities’ (p. 12).

Readers with an interest in environmental values may find Cochrane’s arguments for why a sentientist cosmopolitan democracy entails duties of protection and assistance to wild animals most relevant to questions of environmental ethics and ecological policy. Cochrane is not the first to argue that a just political system will include robust moral and political obligations to nonhuman animals. Donaldson and Kymlicka (2011) argue that humans have varying degrees of obligations to animals, obligations differentiated by animals’ group membership and their relations to us, with obligations to domesticated animals being greater than those to wild animals. On Donaldson and Kymlicka’s view, positive duties of assistance to wild animals are reserved for circumstances such as natural disasters or threats from destructive invaders (including both humans and nonhumans), since wild animals are members of their own sovereign communities. As robust as Donaldson and Kymlicka’s injunction to assist may be, Cochrane’s cosmopolitan democracy abandons such relational, group-based accounts of justice in favour of a radical egalitarianism intended to provide protections of the rights of *all* sentient beings, regardless of species, group membership (‘domesticated’ or ‘wild’), relations to humans, or level of dependency upon humans.

The question of our duties to wild animals – known in the literature as the *predation problem* – poses a conundrum for animal rights theorists. If sentient beings are our moral equals with rights that create attendant duties to protection and aid, and if wild animals are fellow members of mixed human-animal communities, then it would seem to follow that we have an obligation to defend prey animals from predator animals. Though some animal ethics scholars have followed the logic to such counterintuitive conclusions (e.g., Sapontzis 1987; Horta 2017), the overwhelming majority deny duties of assistance to wild animals, advising against obligatory intervention on various grounds.

Cautioning readers against hastily dismissing such an inference, Cochrane does not retreat from his claim of positive duties of assistance to wildlife, arguing forcefully that justice demands that we ‘consider a whole set of new interventionist policy options’ including the *obligation* to ‘prevent the harms that wild animals endure’ and ‘assist them when they suffer’ (p. 89), echoing Martha Nussbaum’s proposal of ‘replacing the natural with the just’ (p. 96).

At first blush, most readers might find Cochrane's conclusion to be a *reductio* of his view. Undaunted, Cochrane spends chapter 5 methodically dismantling nearly every anti-interventionist argument in the literature. Though explicating these arguments and Cochrane's rejoinders to them requires more space than permitted here, suffice it to say that Cochrane meticulously disassembles the relations argument, the value of ecosystems argument, the unintended consequences objection, the zooification of nature/end of wilderness argument, and the overburdening cost argument – all with surgical precision.

Sentientist Politics is not, however, beyond reproach. Cochrane's cosmopolitanism fails to address economic structures that drive the immensity of animal suffering. Though aspects of cosmopolitanism can be found in the global solidarity of the proletariat, Critical Theorists and Critical Animal Studies scholars will find Cochrane's analysis and cosmopolitan project impoverished. For them, the strategy of liberal reform over radical revolution disappoints, as Cochrane's proposal manages to ignore the single most destructive manifestation of speciesism and human exceptionalism – that insatiable colossus driving planetary human and animal suffering, mass extinction, and ecological collapse – namely, *capitalism*. In fact, nowhere in the book does Cochrane mention the words 'neoliberalism' or 'capitalism', a critical and conceptual lacuna of no small consequence. Had Cochrane at least acknowledged that the ruthless logic of capitalism fundamentally clashes with the kinder logic of multi-species rights manifest in a broader cosmopolitan democracy, his proposal would only be that much more convincing.

A closing note: in the time it has taken you to read this review, 1.3 million sentient beings were slaughtered for human consumption. The horror and brutality of modern industrialised animal agriculture is inconceivable. Despite its blind spots, Cochrane's programme boldly offers one possible route of escape from the continuing moral atrocity wrought against our nonhuman sentient kin by the hand of human supremacy.

References

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