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# children's moral reasoning about animals: implications for development and education

Gail F. Melson

Human interaction with other animal species is morally complex. Some animals are beloved pets who are considered members of the family. Other animals are food and clothing products for human consumption. Still, other animals are viewed as pests to be eradicated or by contrast, as fascinating even mythologized characters. Thus, moral reasoning about human involvement with animals is inherently complex as well. Yet, theory and research on children's moral reasoning have been anthropocentric, focused solely on relations among humans. A review of moral reasoning about human-animal interaction reveals how children are reasoning about moral rights and demands across, not just within, species. This broader, biocentric perspective calls attention to a morality of care. Integration of moral reasoning in educational contexts involving animals is urged.

Keywords: biocentric, child development, education, human-animal interaction, moral reasoning

## Introduction

The human-animal relationship is complex and multi-faceted. However, this relationship is most often narrowly defined by the human-companion animal bond. This is not surprising, given the very high, and growing number of households with pets in the United States, United Kingdom, South America, and EU countries. As of 2022, the U. S. had 70 million dogs and 74 million cats, the most of any country in the world. Brazil had the second highest number of dogs and cats kept as pets (Pet Ownership Statistics by Country 2023, n.d.). In the U. S., 67% of homes had pets, overwhelmingly dogs and/or cats, in 2020, with anecdotal reporting suggesting an increase during the Covid pandemic period. The broad trend shows increasing pet ownership. In 1988, 56% of U. S. households had pets. By 2020, the percentage had risen to 67% (Pet Ownership Statistics [2022], 2023). In Asia, where petkeeping of dogs and cats has been traditionally much lower, rates have been increasing rapidly. For example, in comparison to all other countries, China had the second-highest number of cats kept as pets as of 2020. In its 2020 report, the World Population Review concluded: "The pet industry in China has exploded during the past ten years." (Pet Ownership Statistics by Country 2023, n.d.).

At the same time, other human relationships with animals (working dogs and horses; raising domestic animals for food products; hunting wild animals for food and other products as well as for recreation; encounters with wild animals) have diminished, particularly in industrialized, densely populated human environments. Climate change, species extinction and endangerment have reduced human contact with many animal species. Human encroachment on previously wild spaces has contributed, not only to animal to human virus transmission and zoonotic diseases, but also to

species decline. Fewer families are raising animals for food products, as agriculture becomes more mechanized and corporatized. Thus, for many, perhaps most children and adults, relating to living animals has become synonymous with having a pet or companion animal at home.

As the diversity of animal contacts is reduced, technology increases the presence of animal symbols, avatars and representations. Animal-themed books, art and stuffed toys have a long history in human culture. Now, movies, videos, video games, robotics, and social media have joined, and even surpassed, traditional representations. The result is that for most children and adults, even those living in rural areas near wilderness, exposure to wild animals is more likely to occur through watching a nature documentary than in encountering a living wild animal in its habitat (Nabhan & Trimble, 1994).

These broad societal changes raise many questions. Fundamental to them are the ethical and moral dimensions of human-animal interactions and relationships. Most families identify their companion animals as 'members of the family' (Melson, 2001). At the same time, every year millions of pets, mostly dogs and cats, are relinquished to animal shelters that practice euthanasia. This results in the euthanasia of approximately one million pets annually, or 25% of all who are relinquished (Miller, 2021). Thus, families likely mean something different when they define a child vs a pet as a 'member of the family'. (Here, in depth, qualitative studies are needed, asking family members to explain their relationships.) This is another example of the complex and contradictory elements in human-animal relations.

The decline of contact with living animals that are not pets raises moral questions. Will humans view other species as less worthy of existence, let alone protection, as they are removed from the human environment? At the same time, the increase in symbolic media representations of animals, often in highly anthropomorphic and distorted ways, may lead to a parallel distortion in ethics. Some species may become 'favored' in moral regard—as beloved creatures in stories and films—while others are cast as villains. Thus, the lion king is lionized, while the vulture is demonized.

Such complexity implies that moral and ethical stances toward human encounters with animals also will be complex. Understanding moral reasoning about animals and human engagement with them is urgent for several reasons. First, how individuals conceptualize the moral claims (or lack thereof) of animals is likely to influence their behavior in critical areas, such as species conservation, nature protection, animal-based diets, and the welfare of animals in human care. Second, how such moral reasoning develops in childhood may help predict how today's children, as future stewards of the planet's animal life, will engage with issues such as climate change and animal endangerment. Finally, moral reasoning about animals may have broader consequences for moral reasoning about humans. Humane education programs are premised on the untested notion, that teaching kindness and respect toward animals also will stimulate children's empathy and regard for other humans.

## Children's Moral Reasoning

This essay focuses on how children perceive the moral claims of animals, both pets and wild animals. Because of the anthropocentric focus of social sciences (Melson, 2001), this subject lacks a deep empirical base. As a result, we have many more questions than well documented conclusions. How do individual and group differences, particularly, age, gender, culture, and family environment, affect such reasoning? Are there developmental stages in moral reasoning about human relations

with animals? What, if any, are the connections between moral reasoning about animals and action toward them? What are the implications for animal welfare? To what extent does moral reasoning about human relationships relate to inter-species moral reasoning?

The nature and development of moral reasoning in childhood have a long history in developmental psychology. This domain of development focuses on how children gradually understand the 'oughts' of life, what one ought to do in relation to others (prescriptive morality) and what one ought not to do (proscriptive morality) (Melson, 2020). However, until recently, both theory and research have focused exclusively on how children think about the moral implications of relations among humans. What is just, fair and right in cases of human relationships? What should be proscribed as wrong or immoral, and what should be mandated as right and incumbent upon a moral actor?

Lawrence Kohlberg's seminal work derived stages of moral reasoning during childhood from children's responses to stories about moral dilemmas in human interactions. For example, one story was about a man whose wife was dying without access to an expensive drug that would cure her. The man could not obtain the money, and the pharmacist refused to give it to him. As a result, he broke into the pharmacy and stole the drug. Should he have done that? Why or why not? How children answered and explained the reasoning behind their answers yielded a six-stage sequence of moral reasoning (Kohlberg, 1976). As moral reasoning advances, it becomes more nuanced, considering motives, needs and circumstances and applying abstract concepts like justice rather than relying on conventional laws.

Kohlberg's stage theory of moral reasoning has been modified and joined by other approaches (Nucci et al., 2017), but one thing they all have in common is a continued focus exclusively on relations among humans. In fact, scholars of moral reasoning assume that moral concepts presuppose perceptions of strict equality. As Rizzo et al. (2019) state: "Moral concepts such as fairness, justice and rights are premised on the recognition of others as equal" (p. 274). Thus, a morality based on perceived unequal status is assumed to be impossible. Moreover, moral issues arising out of asymmetrical power relationships, with the attendant ethical demands of care and responsibility, also are not addressed.

## Moral Reasoning About Animals

Moral reasoning about human relations with animals challenges assumptions about moral reasoning as a domain of justice and fairness among equals. The companion animal-human relationship is inherently asymmetrical, with the human responsible for the care and well-being of the animal and not vice versa. In addition, when humans engage with wild animals, they do so often in human constructed environments, such as zoos, aquariums, or nature parks, which constrain and control the behavior of resident animals. Throughout human history, other species have been defined as unequal to humans. In sum, the study of moral reasoning about human-animal relations broadens our narrow species-specific, equality-based notions and raises different moral principles. These are principles related to human responsibility for the welfare and care of others, both intra- and inter-species. In fact, one might argue, as Kahn (2022) does, that Kohlberg's notion of a universal morality (the highest stage of moral reasoning in his theory) should extend not only to animals, but also to all of nature.

Recent research on children's moral reasoning about relationships among peers confirms that a morality of care coexists alongside a morality of justice. When children as young as six years of age

are asked to respond to stories about helping, sharing or refraining from anti-social behavior toward other children, they readily engage in reasoning about the moral demands of care and kindness (Beißert et al., 2018).

Research stimulated by HAI research and theory provides ample evidence that children are reasoning morally about human treatment of animals, both domestic and wild. For example, Ruckert (2016) interviewed 7- and 10-year-olds living on the Pacific coast of Washington state about the treatment of grey wolves, an endangered species. While half the children expressed fear of these animals, 94 % extended moral claims to them, arguing that the animals deserved to be undisturbed in their habitat. In particular, the ten-year-olds ascribed moral rights to the animals, such as the right to food, companionship, reproduction, habitat, play, welfare, and autonomy. These findings are consistent with those of Peter Kahn, Jr. (Kahn et al., 2008, 2009) whose cross-cultural interviews showed that even six-year-old children were aware of environmental threats to wild animals and viewed such ecological issues as inherently moral, with animals having moral claims to just and fair treatment by humans.

Kahn's work distinguishes between anthropocentric and biocentric modes of moral reasoning about animals. The former justifies proper treatment of animals only because of their usefulness to humans. The latter sees animals as having an inherent, intrinsic value that exists apart from human needs. As Wilks et al. (2021) suggest, young children are less likely than adults to adopt anthropocentric reasoning that subsumes animal rights to human interests. Similarly, in interviews with children ages 7 to 15, Melson et al. (2014) found that their moral reasoning about the treatment of an unfamiliar dog often used analogies to the rights of other humans. For example, one child argued that it would be wrong to harm the dog, because "how would you like to be hurt in the same way?"

## Variations in Children's Moral Reasoning About Animals

As with any aspect of development, there is likely to be individual variation in how children reason about the moral claims, if any, of human engagement with animals. While there is little research to document sources of variation, there are likely candidates. As stage theories of moral reasoning show, developmental change occurs with cognitive maturation and experience. The question of gender differences in moral reasoning about animals remains unresolved. Girls express more caring toward 'unpopular' wild animals, such as cockroaches, spiders and mosquitoes, than boys do (Zhbanova et al., 2020) and use more emotion-language (happy, sad) when talking about their ties to their pets (Tardif-Williams & Bosacki, 2017). Adults who describe themselves as animal activists, concerned about animal welfare, are disproportionately female (Herzog & Golden, 2009). On the other hand, when seven- to fifteen-year-olds were asked about the moral standing of an unfamiliar but friendly dog with whom they had had a brief play session, boys and girls did not differ in their assessments (Melson et al., 2009).

The quality of a child's bond with a pet has been associated with the moral standing that the child attributes to an unfamiliar friendly dog (Melson et al., 2009). Further, children's involvement in pet care is positively associated with their understanding of the needs of other animals, a fundamental component of moral reasoning (Myers et al., 2004). Perhaps experience with one's own pets generalizes to greater awareness of the needs and moral standing of other animals. Conversely, when children accord moral standing to other animals, children may become more sensitive to and involved with caring for their own pets. Finally, familial, social, and cultural contexts are likely to

influence moral reasoning about human-animal relations, not just human-human relationships (see, for example, Fasoli, 2018). A culture where dogs are on the menu diminishes their claims to moral standing, while a culture that views cows as sacred thereby elevates their moral standing.

## Implications for Animals in Education

Research and theory on children's moral reasoning about relations with animals have not been applied to educational contexts. This essay, however, argues for the need to infuse this moral dimension in all educational contexts. From a young age, children view animals as sentient, autonomous social subjects, not objects. As such, animals are seen as candidates for moral standing. Issues of prescription—what are the rights of animals and the responsibilities of humans who encounter them—and issues of proscription—what is wrong, unjust, and uncaring in human behavior toward animals—engage children's thinking. Studying animal biology, caring for classroom pets, experiencing animal-assisted therapy, observing wild animals, and even tending a schoolyard garden or play area—in each case, morally teachable moments arise. For example, Reading to Dogs programs could include discussion with the child (and other family members) about the needs of the dog, with special attention to animal welfare issues such as fatigue, stress and the need for exercise. The educational benefits of classroom pets can be enhanced with curricula about the needs of the animals and issues of proper care, thereby involving the children in dialogue about what is morally permissible and prohibited in their interactions with the animals. Overall, biocentric education integrates moral reasoning about animals and human relations with them into every aspect of children's experiences with the non-human world. Children are ready to wrestle with the moral implications of these experiences.

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**gail f. melson**

Gail F. Melson, PhD is Professor Emerita at Purdue University, Indiana, USA.