



Sebo, Jeff: *Saving Animals, Saving Ourselves: Why Animals Matter for Pandemics, Climate Change, and Other Catastrophes*

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Abstract

In his new book *Saving Animals, Saving Ourselves: Why Animals Matter for Pandemics, Climate Change, and Other Catastrophes* Jeff Sebo argues that animals matter with regard to human-induced crises and that humans have a moral responsibility to prevent, reduce, or repair the increasing amount of nonhuman suffering and death that we find in today's world. Moreover, he attempts to show how these various human-induced crises are interlinked among themselves and with our treatment of animals in a number of complex ways on both the levels of empirical facts and moral considerations. In this review I summarize Sebo's argumentation and then critically evaluate it.

Keywords Animals ethics · Climate change · Pandemics

In recent years, ethicists have (for obvious sad reasons) increasingly engaged with human-caused global crises such as climate change and pandemics. One peculiar feature of these debates is that they mostly only focus on humans. This is what Jeff Sebo, one of the most prolific researchers in recent animal ethics, sets out to change with his new book *Saving Animals, Saving Ourselves: Why Animals Matter for Pandemics, Climate Change, and Other Catastrophes*.

Sebo first and foremost argues that animals matter with regard to human-induced crises and that humans have a moral responsibility to prevent, reduce, or repair the increasing amount of nonhuman suffering and death that we find in today's world. Moreover, he attempts to show how these various human-induced crises are interlinked among themselves and with our treatment of animals in a number of complex ways on both the levels of empirical facts and moral considerations.

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Following a helpful introduction, Sebo starts things off by explaining his main moral assumptions. He argues that in the Anthropocene, two widely held moral theories, namely animal-friendly versions of utilitarianism and rights theory, by and large converge in practice (Chap. 2). In particular, both theories entail that we ought to include nonhuman animals in health and environmental advocacy and policy, such as in the One Health and the Green New Deal policy frameworks — which first and foremost means reducing support of factory farming, deforestation and the wildlife trade (Chap. 3).

Sebo acknowledges that this demand for a radical change of how we treat nonhuman animals might be considered futile or morally over-demanding. However, in his view, such concerns often only reflect excuses for inaction or result from underestimating our abilities as well as these abilities' malleability (Chap. 4). This response is further bolstered by pointing out eight specific methods for the inclusion of nonhuman animals in health and environmental advocacy and policy, such as promoting research and advocacy for animals, reducing support for harmful industries, and including animals in impact assessments and infrastructure changes (Chap. 5).

Next, Sebo explains how our legal and political systems would have to change to recognize our moral responsibilities. For example, this could involve revising or replacing liberal democratic institutions and capitalism in animal-conducive ways (Chap. 6). The particular extent and nature of these changes is said to depend, among other things, on the difficult question of whether all animals count equally (egalitarianism) or some count more than others (hierarchical views). That said, according to Sebo, even plausible versions of hierarchical views entail major animal-conducive changes to our legal and political systems (Chap. 7).

Finally, Sebo acknowledges that large uncertainties remain about how to assess our impacts on nonhuman animals (Chap. 8). Even though it is clear that we need to “expand our moral circle” — as the concluding chapter argues, and as will be elaborated in more detail in Sebo's next book (*The Moral Circle*) — people can hence reasonably disagree about what exactly a more animal-friendly future version of our world would ideally look like.

I wholeheartedly agree with the main message of *Saving Animals, Saving Ourselves*: animals should be included in debates about the ethics of human-induced global crises. My subsequent critical evaluation will hence mostly pertain to how this message is specified, justified and conveyed.

As noted by Sebo himself, his book operates on a rather abstract, general and sometimes simplified level. At some points it may also somewhat lack in nuance. For example, while factory farming, deforestation and the wildlife trade are certainly among those practices that are most harmful to nonhuman animals, the magnitude of their harm significantly differs on almost any plausible standard (with, e.g., wildlife trade ranking much lower than factory farming and deforestation). Sebo also sometimes does not account for the highly differing levels of certainty that should be attached to some of his empirical claims, such as about climate change leading to sea level rise (very high likelihood) versus its impacts on species extinction (much more moderate likelihood).

Considering this approach, it may seem as if *Saving Animals, Saving Ourselves* might not only be addressed to experts but also to a broader audience. However, this impression is somewhat contradicted by the book's style. In contrast to some other authors in the field of animal ethics, Sebo's writing is very analytic, at times almost a bit mechanical (all para-

graphs have the same length, wordings and paragraph structures repeat themselves, etc.). This leads to a less emotionally engaging reading experience than some non-experts may seek. Put more positively, however, this feature of the book also immediately frees it from any suspicion that it is an exercise in activism rather than rigorous scholarship; and many readers may actually appreciate its sober, non-intrusive tone.

Philosophers in particular might be a bit disappointed by the fact that a number of central normative claims are just assumed rather than argued for. They may also take issue with the framing of these assumptions and with what their implications are claimed to be. For example, it seems to me that the variants of utilitarianism and rights theory that make up Sebo's pluralistic moral framework are more peculiar and contentious than is suggested; what is claimed to be convergence in practice is sometimes actually the result of theoretical tweaking; and one might also question certain other claims that the convergence argument relies on (such as about the amount and moral significance of human complicity in nonhuman harm, and in particular in harm to wild animals, in the Anthropocene).

As is typical for book reviews, I have so far mostly focused on areas of disagreement. But this should not distract from the fact that Sebo's book also exemplifies a variety of virtues of far greater weight. The book skillfully conjoins ethical reasoning with findings from the natural and social sciences; it provides overviews of possible and plausible ethical theses about various animal-related issues; it shows that often even the weakest of these theses imply far more moral consideration of nonhuman animals than we currently grant them; although Sebo sometimes makes rather strong claims, e.g., when it comes to the moral consideration of insects, he also strives to account for our limited moral sensibilities; and he is extremely open and clear-sighted about the book's limitations (up to the point of anticipating some of the concerns that I have raised above).

What I liked most about the book is the cautiousness, honesty and holism of Sebo's approach. In this messy, complex world that we inhabit, things are interrelated on many large and small scales in numerous ways, and often exceed our current level of understanding. *Saving Animals, Saving Ourselves* accounts for this fact and manages to illuminate a variety of these interconnections, not only the most general one that is alluded to in its title — saving ourselves also means saving animals, and vice versa — but also many smaller ones, without ignoring major empirical and moral uncertainties. It thereby lays valuable groundwork for more concrete and specific future investigations into how animals should be included in our ethical thinking about human-induced crises.

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