

"If Animals Matter Morally, Then We Cannot Treat Them As Commodities"

by [Aazan Ahmad](#) – August 1, 2016

A conversation with animal rights advocate Gary Francione

Gary L. Francione is a controversial figure in the modern animal rights movement, known for his "abolitionist approach" towards animal rights. A professor of law and philosophy at Rutgers University, Francione believes that we cannot morally justify using animals as mere resources and that we should abolish all animal use. He argues that any being that feels pain has a right to not be used as property and that veganism should be the moral underpinning of the animal rights movement. As he puts it, "To not be a vegan is to participate directly in animal exploitation."



Photo by Vegano Siempre

Francione was the first person to teach animal rights in an American law school when he began teaching a course on animal rights and law at Rutgers in 1989. He has focused nearly four decades of academic scholarship in forwarding a theory of animal rights that posits that sentience alone (and not just cognitive intelligence as defined by humans) qualifies a being for the fundamental right of not being considered the property of another. He links the struggle for animal rights with other social movements and argues that the animal rights movement is the logical progression of the peace movement.

Francione has written multiple books and countless articles on animal ethics and animal law, and is particularly well known for his critical view of the animal welfare movement, which he says serves primarily to make people feel better about animal exploitation. His latest book, *Eat Like You Care: An Examination of the Morality of Eating Animals* (2013), co-authored with his partner and fellow Rutgers professor Anna Charlton, answers all the "but" questions that any non-vegan could possibly ask about transitioning to a vegan lifestyle.

I recently spoke with Francione via Skype and email about his latest book, his philosophy on animal rights, and his thoughts on both the animal welfare and animal personhood movements.

What event in your life caused you to become an animal rights activist?

In the late 1970s, I visited a slaughterhouse. It changed my life overnight. It became clear to me that our use of nonhumans as human resources presented a most serious moral question that was, for the most part, being ignored.

What is your philosophy concerning animal rights?

My position is that if animals matter morally at all — and I believe that most people believe that they do matter morally — then they must have at least one right: The right not to be used exclusively as human resources. The right not to be chattel property.

Interests can be protected in one of two ways. We can protect an interest only to the extent that to do so maximizes desirable consequences. Or we can protect that interest irrespective of consequences. The latter way of protecting an interest is what we describe as involving a right. To say that I have a right of free speech is simply to say that my speech will be protected even if other disagree with and think that my speech generates undesirable consequences.

If the interest in not being chattel property is not protected by a right, then that interest will be ignored when it is beneficial to do so. We recognize this where humans are concerned. We protect the interest that humans have in not being slaves with a right. We recognize that if humans are going to be members of the moral community, they must have the right not to be chattel slaves. If they are chattel slaves, they exist outside the moral community. They are things and not persons.

The same analysis holds true where nonhumans are concerned. If they are going to matter morally, they must have the right not to be property. If they are property, they are just things that have only extrinsic or external value, and do not have inherent or intrinsic value.

If we recognize this one right, then we are morally committed to abolishing the institutionalized exploitation of nonhuman animals. It's not a matter of improving the *treatment* of animals. It's a matter of abolishing the *use* of animals.

One of the key tenets of your philosophy is veganism. Could you explain why you think it's important?

Veganism means that we do not eat, wear, or otherwise use animals.

I maintain that there is veganism and there is animal exploitation: There is no third choice. To not be a vegan is to participate directly in animal exploitation. That is, if we eat animals or animal products, wear wool, leather, fur, etc., or use products made from animals, we are treating animals as things with no morally significant interests.

As an abolitionist, I promote veganism as a moral baseline or a moral imperative and as the *only* rational response to the recognition that animals have moral value. If animals matter morally, then we cannot treat them as commodities and eat, wear, or use them. Just as someone who promotes the abolition of slavery should not own slaves, an abolitionist with respect to animal slavery should not consume animal products. As far as I am concerned, veganism is a fundamental matter of justice.

Advocating veganism as a fundamental principle of justice is not something that requires large, wealthy animal charities and "leaders." It is something that we all can do and must do as a grassroots movement. Each of us must be a leader.

Let me say that there is no difference between meat and other animal products. Animals used for dairy and eggs are also treated horribly and they all end up in the same slaughterhouse as their "meat" counterparts. If you do not eat meat but you eat dairy and eggs, you are still directly responsible for animal suffering and death.

Your view on animal rights, particularly your views on animal welfare, has been criticized by some sections of the animal-protection movement, who say that animal welfare does provide some interim protection to animals until their rights can be established. How do you respond to such criticism?

Animal welfare is problematic for moral and practical reasons.

From a moral perspective, if animal use cannot be morally justified, then it is morally wrong to promote supposedly "humane" exploitation. Think about it in a human context. If slavery is wrong, then promoting "humane" slavery is not the answer. The only morally acceptable solution is to promote the abolition of slavery.

From a practical perspective, because animals are chattel property, and because it costs money to protect their interests, we protect animal interests generally only when we get an economic benefit. For example, we have laws that require animals to be stunned at the moment of slaughter because animals who are not stunned can injure workers and they incur carcass damage. Worker injuries and carcass damage cost money. For the most part, welfare reforms make animal exploitation more efficient. They are measures that, for the most part, industry will take anyway because it is beneficial for industry to do so.

As far as I am concerned, the primary purpose of animal welfare measures is to make humans feel better about continuing to exploit animals.

Do you think human society is at a point where it's receptive to the idea of animal personhood, which would bestow animals with the basic rights to life and liberty?

Absolutely. I believe that most people already accept the idea that nonhumans are not things and are beings with moral value. Most people accept that it is wrong to inflict unnecessary suffering on nonhuman animals. Most people become outraged when they hear about "animal cruelty" cases precisely because they object to the infliction of unnecessary suffering.

The challenge is to get them to see that if they are not vegan, then they are morally no different from the "abusers" they criticize. It is not necessary to eat animal products in order to have optimal health. Indeed, mainstream health care professionals are increasingly recognizing that animal products are detrimental to human health. The best justification we have for inflicting suffering and death on billions of land animals and trillions of sea animals is that they taste good. That is no better a justification than maintaining that the enjoyment of watching a bullfight justifies bullfighting.

I am very optimistic about the future. I think the abolitionist vegan movement — a grassroots movement of people all over the world — is really gathering a great deal of momentum.

Given that you believe that sentience is the only characteristic required for personhood, what are your thoughts on the Nonhuman Rights Projects efforts to get *certain* animal species like chimpanzees and elephants declared nonhuman persons?

Sentience is subjective awareness. A sentient being is someone who perceives and experiences the world. A sentient being has interests; that is, preferences, wants, or desires. If a being is sentient, then that is necessary and sufficient for the being to have the right not to be used as a means to human ends. The recognition of this right imposes on humans the moral obligation not to use that being as a resource. It is not necessary for a sentient being to have humanlike cognitive characteristics in order to be accorded the right not to be used as property.

Intelligence and humanlike cognition may be relevant for some purposes, but they are not relevant for the basic right not to be used as property. As far as that one right is concerned, there is no difference between a chimpanzee and a mouse. We should not use either exclusively as a human resource.

Again, think about it in the nonhuman context. There are all sorts of differences between a human who is brilliant and a human who is severely mentally disabled. Those differences may be relevant for certain purposes, but we should not use either human as a forced organ donor or as a non-consenting subject of a biomedical experiment.

So if not through incremental efforts, such as getting one species at a time recognized as persons with rights, how do we get around to establishing the abolition of animal exploitation?

We get to the abolition of animal exploitation through creative, nonviolent vegan advocacy. We need to stop the demand for animal exploitation. And we can do that. Assume that we have 1 million vegans in the US. That's a very low estimate. If every one of those people educated one other person to become vegan in the next year, there would be 2 million vegans. If the process repeated

itself every year, the United States would be vegan in eight years. Each of us can play a role in bringing about a vegan world!

How do you feel about the killing of Harambe the gorilla? Do you think the killing was inevitable, that the zoo had no choice?

A child got into the enclosure. The gorilla was a piece of property. If Harambe had injured the child, the legal liability of the zoo would have been astronomical. So I am not surprised that the zoo had Harambe killed. I object to zoos. And although I thought it was tragic that Harambe was killed, it's no more tragic than the killing of millions of "food" animals every day. There is no moral difference between Harambe and the nameless chicken that people consumed for dinner last night.

What are you working on at the moment?

Anna Charlton, my co-author on *Eat Like You Care*, and I are working on a handbook about abolitionist vegan advocacy.

If you had one message to give to all animal lovers, what would it be?

Loving animals is not consistent with harming them. If you love animals — if you believe that animals matter — then stop participating directly in the exploitation of animals. It's morally wrong. Go vegan!

[Aazan Ahmad](#)

Aazan Ahmad is fifteen years old and lives in Seoul, South Korea. He loves to read and write.