

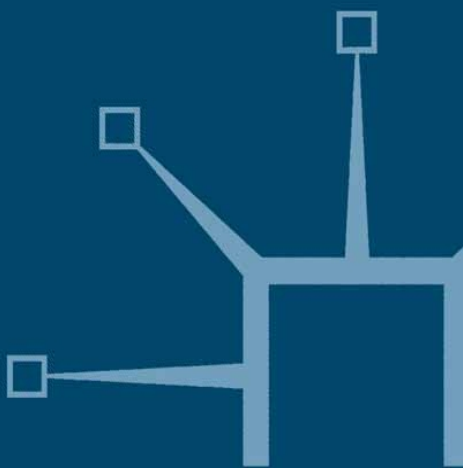
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# Zoos

A Philosophical Tour

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Keekok Lee



Zoos

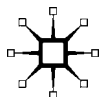
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PHILOSOPHY AND REVOLUTIONS IN GENETICS

# Zoos

## A Philosophical Tour

Keekok Lee



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# Introduction

This book has an unusual take on zoos. It is a philosophical exploration of the concept of zoos, not, however, from the usual ethical angle of either animal welfare or animal rights, but from the ontological standpoint.<sup>1</sup> It demonstrates that the animals kept in zoos are, indeed, unique to zoos – they are not wild, nor are they domesticants in the classical understanding of domestication. Ontologically speaking, they are not tokens of wild species but of what may be called artefactual species. Such a provocative thesis also has controversial and radical policy implications for zoos, as it challenges those policies advocated by the World Zoo Conservation Strategy (1993) and the European Union Zoos Directive (1999). The book is written not solely for philosophers and philosophy students but in a manner which makes it readily accessible to zoo theorists and managers world-wide, as well as to anyone who has a professional or lay interest in zoos and their futures.

The central contention of this book is that the ontological status of animals in zoos is different from that of animals in the wild. The former are not wild, amounting to what may be called biotic artefacts, and constitute the *ontological foil* to the latter.

This claim is inspired by two sources: first, what may be called the zoological conception of animals; second, the commonly accepted official definition of zoos as collections of animal exhibits open to the public. The respective implications of each of these two accounts are then teased out. Such an approach leads, as already mentioned, to some surprising conclusions and to some interesting implications for policy consideration in zoo management. The ontological stance and arguments presented in this book are, in principle, not against zoos; zoos are acceptable provided they are prepared to admit that their exhibits are not wild but tame or immured animals, that the individual immured animal is not a token of

any wild species.<sup>2</sup> However, to admit this logic would entail that the only sound theoretical justification of zoos lies in recreation, and not in the more high-minded mission of education-for-conservation of wild animals, or of *ex situ* conservation, tasks which zoos necessarily cannot accomplish, as an ontological dissonance exists between, on the one hand, the immured animals and their behaviour on view as exhibits, and on the other, the mistaken belief, on the part of zoos, that by looking at such exhibits, visitors would actually be learning about wild animals, their behaviour in the wild and the need to save them and their habitats in the wild. Ironically, it transpires that the zoo-visiting public may have a better intuitive grasp of the ontological issues at stake, as they seem to accept happily and simply the fact that they derive pleasure and enjoyment from looking at, indeed, a unique kind of animal – only to be found in zoos – animals which may look wild but are not wild, and which necessarily do not behave like those in the wild. For them, the zoo experience is indeed unique, but not, however, in the way that zoo theorists and professionals have in mind.

Chapter 1 sets the scene for the ontological exploration of zoos by distinguishing between five different conceptions of animals, namely, the lay person's conception, the conceptions presupposed respectively by the philosophy of animal welfare (Singer) and animal rights (Regan), the zoo's conception and the zoological conception.

Chapter 2 elaborates on the zoological conception which rests primarily on the Darwinian theory of natural evolution and its mechanism of natural selection, in the context of other equally relevant sciences, such as genetics as well as ethology and ecology. At the same time, it introduces certain key philosophical notions such as trajectory, the distinction between existing 'by themselves' and 'for themselves'. The scientific and the philosophical components combine to lay down a delineation of the ontological status of animals in the wild, which in the chapters to follow, is argued as constituting the ontological foil to zoo animals.

Chapter 3 begins the delineation of the ontological status of animals under captivity in zoos by disentangling the conceptual confusions in terms such as 'wild animals in captivity', a phrase which occurs and recurs in zoo literature. However, it is an oxymoron, as the animals under zoo captivity are *ex hypothesi* tame; 'tame' is the antonym of 'wild', in a crucial sense of the term.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 begin to go beyond the mere conceptual contradiction to demonstrate in earnest that zoo animals are, from the ontological perspective, very different beings from animals in the wild. Chapter 4 takes seriously the definition of zoos as 'collections of animal exhibits

open to the public', teasing out its logical and ontological implications; it also examines the ideas that zoo animals are necessarily exotic (in the technical sense) animals, and that the environment provided for them is also, therefore, necessarily 'exotic' in the sense that, at best, their exhibit enclosures are simulated, naturalistic environments which bear no resemblance to habitats in the wild. Chapters 5 and 6 go beyond the simulation of naturalistic environments to examine several crucial aspects of animal life under zoo management which bear no resemblance whatsoever to the lives led by animals in the wild: (a) the miniaturisation of simulated space (in some extreme cases, enclosure space is 10 000 times smaller than the home range of the animal in the wild); (b) 'hotelification' (a word coined to refer to the fact that food is not food as in the wild, which is hunted or foraged, but are substitutes prepared in zoo kitchens, served up in much the same way as one would put out food for one's pet); (c) medication to prevent suffering from discomfort or disease, but also to ward off death and prolong the lives of the animals under zoo management. All these features add up to the suspension of the mechanism of natural selection within the context of natural evolution.<sup>3</sup>

Chapters 7 and 8 pursue the implications of the suspension of natural evolution and natural selection in the context of zoo management. Chapter 7 argues that zoo animals are immured animals – 'immuration' is a term coined to embody the key idea that they are, indeed, domesticated animals, even though it is true that they do not readily fall within the traditional, classical definition of domestication, and that there is a need to distinguish between two kinds of domestication. Chapter 8 reinforces this logic, arguing that immured animals are biotic artefacts, by laying bare the ontological features of artefacts in general, and showing that the term 'biotic artefacts' is neither conceptually confused nor incoherent. It formally introduces the type/token distinction and shows that an individual immured animal is not a token of a wild species, but of an immured species. In other words, zoo animals are uniquely different from animals in the wild as well as from traditional domesticants such as cats and dogs.

Chapters 9 and 10 begin the task of teasing out the policy implications of the ontological thesis established in the preceding chapters by critically examining the justifications for zoos. The three so-called serious justifications – research, conservation (*ex situ*) and education – are shown to be defective and, indeed, even deeply flawed given the ontological dissonance between zoo animals and wild animals in the wild. Curiously, the so-called frivolous justification in terms of recreation seems to have survived critical scrutiny best of all.

Chapter 11 and the Conclusion draw the book to a close by reconsidering the five conceptions of animals distinguished in Chapter 1 in the light of the ontological insights yielded by the subsequent chapters. The single most important conclusion, from the policy point of view, which this exploration has come up with is that zoos do, emphatically, have a future, indeed, a thriving future but, ironically, not perhaps the future which the World Zoo Conservation Strategy (1993) and the European Union Zoos Directive (1999) envisage and strenuously advocate – zoos are neither the modern-day scientific Noah’s Ark nor are they the Open University for education-in-conservation, as they are human cultural spaces which necessarily humanise the animals under their care and control. Their animal exhibits, in reality, offer clean, wholesome family fun and entertainment. That is why, world-wide, they are big draws and big business. Ironically, it follows that although zoos (via *ex situ* conservation) may not be truly relevant to the project of saving extant threatened wild species from extinction, they, unwittingly, play a role in adding to biodiversity – though not of the natural kind – by nurturing and creating, in the long run, new immured, artefactual species.

# 1

## What Does the Public Find in Zoos?

The question in the title of this chapter seems silly and naïve. However, there is a point in posing it, as behind the obvious answer to it stands a whole lot of complexities which must be unravelled before one could ultimately answer in a satisfactory manner the issues raised in the Introduction.<sup>1</sup>

Surely, even a child would be able to say that in zoos one finds animals. The child would be right in one undoubted sense. While there are trees in zoos, one does not go to a zoo specially to see plants; plants are incidental to the *raison d'être* and aims of zoos. Zoos exist to exhibit animals.<sup>2</sup>

However, the intriguing question is: 'What animals do zoos exhibit? All animals?' To which we may answer: 'Not at all; only some select few.' In other words, the selection presupposes a certain conception of what counts as an animal. We need to explore that conception, and compare it with at least three other conceptions, bringing out the overlapping concerns and relationships (if any) between them, making clear their respective hidden agendas and assumptions, whenever relevant.

### The lay person's conception

Let us start with the ordinary lay person's conception of what counts as an animal. The first thing to notice is that it sticks to the commonsensical understanding of the traditional two-kingdom schema (as evidenced in the obvious answer to the naïve question mentioned above); they would have no difficulty classifying squirrels as animals and conifers as plants, but on the whole they would have no opinion whether bacteria count as animals, since they would have no knowledge nor would they have given the matter any thought.

In general, society's interest in certain animals was/is dictated by the roles they play in human lives – these animals have either religious/cultural, culinary, economic or personal significance for the social group or individual in question. For instance, some groups have chosen even rats (vertebrate) and snakes (invertebrate) as objects of religious worship. Some cherish the bald eagle as a symbol of national (tribal) virility, others the lion. Which animals are good to eat and which are not clearly varies according to culture and to historical period. Dogs are good to eat for the Dayaks (in Borneo), while cows, for Hindus, are not for eating at all. Tigers, rhinoceroses and some whales, today, are in danger of being hunted to extinction for economic reasons.

Beyond identifying animals which belong to these main categories of concern, most people remain in ignorance of those not encompassed. Today, in the industrialised and industrialising world, 'animals' as a generality are not all that pertinent to their lives. Particular types of animals may, outside these categories, catch their attention because they are exotic (in which case they go to the zoo to see them or watch them in a television programme), charismatic like the lion, or cuddly like the panda. As far as lay people are concerned, birds seem to be the only class of animals which commands a sizeable minority of followers dedicated to watching and studying them; and amongst ornithologists knowledge of them can be thorough and comprehensive.

As most societies have long left the hunter/gatherer mode of existence behind, the only animals which form part of their immediate experience and consciousness are domesticated animals – cows, pigs, sheep, goats, chickens (which are good to eat); horses, bullocks, camels (which are good for traction and transportation but also to eat in some cultures); and dogs and cats (which, in the West, are good for companionship, guarding the house or catching mice but not good to eat). Except for chickens, ducks and turkeys which are birds, the rest are mammals. In other words, the word 'animal' would, in the context of utility derived from domestication, typically conjure up either of these two classes of the phylum chordate. In some cultures, some species of fish have been domesticated, and increasingly today salmon and trout are also being cultivated. However, domestication, throughout world history, has been confined to only a few species of these vertebrate classes.

In contemporary consciousness, the image or idea of what counts as an animal has become even more circumscribed, as increasingly in urban contexts, domesticated animals are not directly encountered. Some children even have difficulty associating pork with an animal called the pig or milk with the cow, pork and milk being just packaged items the family

purchases from the supermarket. This means that animals as domestic pets occupy centre stage; especially in developed countries, cats and dogs are the most prevalent. Children, increasingly, are taught to identify animals via these exemplars. For them, the denotation as well as the connotation of the term 'animal' is paradigmatically given and determined by the varieties of dogs and cats they find in the household. If asked whether they share their homes with animals, they would confidently say no provided they kept no cats, dogs, budgerigars, goldfish or hamsters. If reminded that most homes, and therefore, theirs, would have a mouse or two, they would feel justifiably shocked. But to them, if compelled to acknowledge their presence, mice are not animals in the way pets are animals – they are at best animals only in some technical sense. To them they are just pests. And if told that mites live in the detritus of their scalp or upon their skin, and in their carpets, they would be horrified; unlike mice or rats, they would even have difficulty accepting or understanding these as animals at all.

To sum up, the lay consciousness increasingly is confined to grasping animals in terms of a few domesticated species of mammals which are regarded as friends to humans or of a few exotic and/or charismatic animals which they see occasionally in zoos (as we shall see).

### **Conceptions presupposed by animal welfare/liberation and animal rights**

We next turn to the conception of what counts as an animal via the defence of animals against human cruelty; it is essentially a protest against the ways in which animals are: (a) kept/caught and then slaughtered for food or other human purposes; (b) used in scientific research and experimentation whether for the serious purpose of saving human lives or the relatively more trivial one of improving the appearance of human bodies; and (c) hunted, hounded or killed for human pleasure.

The more traditional justification, derived from philosophers like Kant, is that the duty not to be cruel to animals is in reality an indirect duty to humans, as the infliction of cruelty upon animals could dispose us to be callous towards fellow human beings. But of late, this highly anthropocentric standpoint has been powerfully challenged by two contemporary philosophers – Peter Singer (1976) and Tom Regan (1983) – who, in spite of the obviously different philosophical stances each has adopted, nevertheless are united in repudiating the dominant humanist tradition of Kant and the Enlightenment, at least regarding the treatment of animals.



A minimalist reconstruction of Singer's philosophy of animal welfare includes the following:

- (a) *The hedonic postulate.* Pleasure and pain as mental states are respectively intrinsically good and evil.
- (b) *The consequentialist/utilitarian postulate.* One ought always to maximise pleasure and minimise pain in one's actions.
- (c) *The boundaries of sentience postulate.* (a) and (b) are 'blind' to the kind of being which is capable of feeling pleasure and pain. Humans clearly are sentient but empirically it can be shown that humans are not the only sentient beings. Other mammals, too, clearly are sentient. Birds are as well. Erring on the side of caution and charity, the boundary should then be drawn somewhere around shrimps and, possibly, lobsters.
- (d) *The consistency postulate.* As we, today, believe that we have a moral duty not to keep and eat fellow humans for food, to perform vivisection on them with or without their consent, to hunt, maim or slaughter fellow humans for entertainment, then equally, we have a moral duty not to do likewise to fellow sentient beings.

A minimalist reconstruction of Regan's philosophy of animal rights includes the following:

- (a) *The rights postulate.* (i) an entity is intrinsically (or inherently, in Regan's terminology) valuable if and only if it is capable of being the subject of a life, that is to say, possessing memory, beliefs and desires as well as other mental states, and (ii) an entity is a rights holder if and only if the entity is capable of being the subject of a life.
- (b) *The conceptual postulate.* To be the subject of a life, to experience mental states like beliefs and desires, conceptually speaking, it is not necessary to possess verbal language at all or human language as we understand it to be.
- (c) *The boundaries of the subject-of-a-life postulate.* (a) and (b) are 'blind' to the kind of entity which can satisfy the criterion of being the subject of a life. Humans (or at least the majority of them) are clear candidates, but empirically it can be shown (once (b) has been conceded) that mammals, too, are candidates. Erring on the side of caution and charity, the boundary of eligibility should then be drawn at birds.
- (d) *The consistency postulate.* As we, today, hold the view that human beings have a right not to be kept and eaten by fellow humans, to have vivisection performed on them with or without their consent, to

be hunted, maimed or slaughtered by fellow humans for entertainment, then equally, other mammals (and possibly birds) have a right not to be treated likewise by us humans.

There are obvious differences in the philosophical foundations provided by Singer and Regan and the debate which ensues between the two sides – one is anchored in moral duties understood in the context of hedonic consequentialism, the other in moral rights, deontologically understood, in the context of certain characteristics of mental life in humans and closely related mammalian others.<sup>3</sup> However, these differences notwithstanding, the two do have certain things in common, apart from their agreed common goal to end cruelty to, and the suffering of, animals. Their respective implicit conceptions of what is an animal are given by the criterion they each have chosen as the most fundamental postulate of their philosophy of animal liberation – the hedonic postulate in the case of Singer and the rights postulate in the case of Regan.

In either, the paradigmatic animal is the human animal. Although Bentham, as the commonly acknowledged founding father of modern utilitarianism, had said that certain animals also come within the purview of his fundamental postulate, nevertheless, utilitarianism, as propagated and inspired by him, has chosen to concentrate on humans as the paradigmatic sentient beings. Similarly, the concept of rights – understood either as natural or contractual rights – has long been conducted, until very recently, within an exclusively human domain.

Singer uses the image of the expanding (moral) circle, in order to draw certain other beings, so far excluded by modern Western philosophy, into its orbit. Regan endorses this implicitly. However, both proceed on the assumption that there is a limit to which this circle may be enlarged – Singer's fundamental postulate allows him to redraw it with a somewhat wider radius than Regan's. But in the centre of their circles is the human. The further a being is from that centre, the more difficult it would be to make a case for bestowing on it the status of being morally considerable.<sup>4</sup> The human is, of course, a mammal. Hence, extending moral duties or rights to fellow mammals is their most obvious target. This has prompted some commentators to say, especially in the case of Regan's account, that it is really about mammalian rights.

In general, it might not be too unfair to say that both philosophies are underpinned by an overarching postulate, namely the search for similarities and likenesses between humans and certain animal others.<sup>5</sup> As such, the more an animal resembles humans in certain specified ways, the easier it is to argue for admitting them into the moral circle.

Of the mammals, the Great Apes come closest to us – this class is held to consist of the gorillas, the orang-utans, the chimpanzees and then ourselves as the long-missing fourth Great Ape.

While those animals within the pale are accorded a dignity befitting their newly acquired status of being morally considerable, those outside, as a result, are dealt a double blow – first, they are owed no moral duties and denied moral rights, and second, the term ‘animal liberation’ or ‘animal rights’ itself goes even further and serves implicitly to deny them the status of animality itself. In other words, only those beings which qualify to be the bearers of rights or to be the object of our moral duties are ‘proper’ or ‘true’ animals. The denotation and connotation of the word ‘animal’ has surreptitiously and subtly been revised so that even on Singer’s more hospitable expansion of the moral circle, worms, molluscs and many more are debarred. The similarities postulate has forcefully challenged human chauvinism, the view which sets humans apart from other animals, assigning to themselves a superior status of privilege and domination.<sup>6</sup> It attempts to force human consciousness to concede that humans, as mammals, are really fellow animals. They (together with those admitted into the expanded circle) are owed duties not to be tortured and held to enjoy rights to life, and so on. Strictly speaking, in Singer’s moral/political philosophy, a single hedonic consequentialist theory is postulated to embrace all sentient beings, from mammals down the evolutionary scale to possibly some crustaceans like lobsters, just as in Regan’s moral/political philosophy, a single unified theory of rights is postulated, covering all mammals and possibly birds. However, the price for this revision is the construction of a new demarcation line between the ingroup and the out-group. Members of the latter are pariahs because they are unlike us in crucial respects, and therefore cannot be animals, a category to which we, ourselves, now belong. A hierarchical or class system remains in place – the franchised and the privileged against the non-franchised and the disadvantaged. It is just that the former now includes not simply us, but those beings which are like us in certain selected aspects. Human chauvinism may have been vanquished but its spirit has not been challenged by either Singer or Regan and remains unexorcised in their respective philosophies.

### **The zoo’s conception**

We have seen how the denotation and connotation of the term ‘animal’ endorsed by the lay conception as well as that of Singer or Regan permit the lay public as well as animal theorists such as Singer and Regan to be