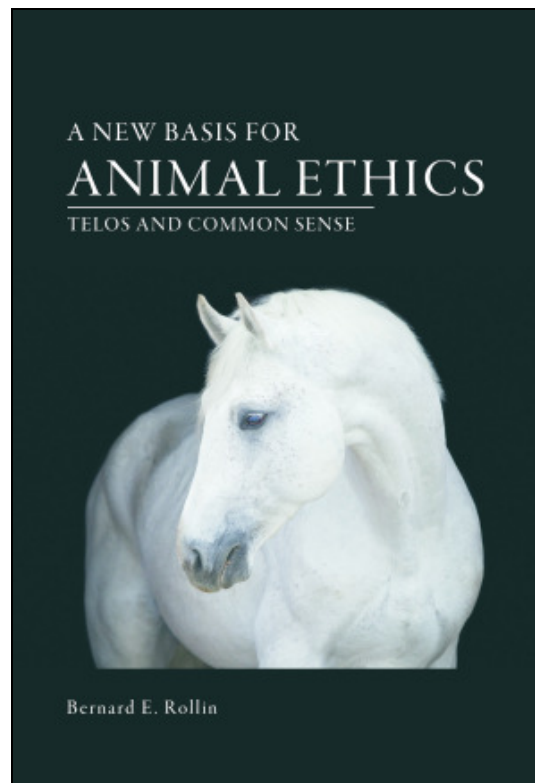


## Reviews

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### **A** Not So New Basis for Animal Ethics

Bernie Rollin, *A New Basis for Animal Ethics: Telos and Common Sense*. University of Missouri Press, 2016. 209 pp. \$40.00.



About ten years ago, I visited a pig farrowing facility near my rural Indiana town, tagging along on a field trip arranged by a colleague. It was a modest-sized facility by current standards, clean and well-lit, housing a few hundred docile sows, about midway through their pregnancies. The farmer who hosted the group spoke, as expected, of the benefits of climate control, individualized feeding and veterinary care, and stalls that protect smaller and less aggressive pigs from the abuse of bigger bullies. I was not too surprised to hear him express some regret at the imperative to intensify and specialize in order to remain in the hog business. What surprised me was his reaction upon learning that I was a philosopher who teaches a course in animal ethics. “Have you ever heard of Bernie Rollin?” he asked me. “Well, I heard him speak once. He made

some good sense.” If memory serves, he said this was at an ag convention. Wait; what? An academic philosopher? Speaking at an *ag convention*?

As a (then) early career philosopher working in a marginalized corner of the discipline, I felt a certain gratitude to Bernard Rollin for whatever he said to earn that farmer’s approving remark — as if it lent me a kind of vicarious legitimation. And I was astonished to hear he was being invited by organizations that represent factory farmers to speak with them directly. In a context where animal advocates are commonly called extremists if not terrorists, just how does any critic of factory farming get such an invitation — let alone an academic philosopher? Who is this guy?, I wondered. What could he be saying? What’s his secret sauce?

By all rights, Bernie Rollin has to be regarded as one of the most influential animal ethicists emerging from the analytic philosophical tradition. He is a prolific scholar, having published 18 books and hundreds of journal articles. He has delivered over a thousand lectures around the world to practitioners in various fields of animal use as well as to university audiences. In practical terms, he has helped to “eliminat[e] many of the atrocious exercises that were earlier seen as essential to becoming a veterinarian or a physician or a science professor,” to establish “control of pain in research as a major duty of the responsible researcher and ... encode this duty in legislation,” and to “catalyze the elimination of one of the most egregiously inhumane housing systems regnant in confinement agriculture: sow stalls, or gestation crates” (ix). In 2016, he received a Lifetime Achievement Award for Excellence in Research Ethics from Public Responsibility in Medicine & Research, a leading professional association and policy advocacy organization for research ethicists in the biomedical sciences. It’s fair to say he has been a significant player in the evolution of what he calls the “social-consensus ethic” regarding animals — and thus in the rise of the field of Human Animal Studies itself — over the past four decades.

Having recently worked through Rollin’s latest book, *A New Basis for Animal Ethics: Telos and Common Sense*, I’ve found it pays to remind myself of these remarkable shifts and to wonder about the characters, including Rollin, who brought them about. How has he managed to be so influential within fields of practice that he has at the same time confronted as morally indefensible? And how have his positions and tactics aligned and/or contrasted with those of other animal ethicists and advocates? I suspect that, had I approached the book with those questions in mind — questions more historical and biographical than philosophical — then I would have enjoyed it a great deal more. What we get from *A New Basis* is Rollin’s account of the processes, strategies, and

arguments through which he has managed to reach across chasms of moral disagreement and contribute meaningfully to social and institutional change. It's broad work ranging over a wide swath of philosophy, history, and professional practice, elaborated through anecdotes recalling philosophical arguments with students, colleagues and others. Much of the material has been previously published in other forms and venues, but Rollin clearly intends the book as a retrospective synopsis for a general audience rather than a new theoretical contribution for an audience of fellow scholars. More relaxed than academic, *A New Basis* conveys the Socratic brazenness for which Rollin is widely known and frequently admired. If you want to get broad sense of Rollin's work and character — his secret sauce, so to speak — without reading his extensive body of research or his autobiography *Putting the Horse before Descartes*, this would be an excellent go-to source, along with a few of the many YouTube videos that provide a window into Rollin's career and personality.

The book is divided into two parts. Part one, "Creating an Animal Ethic," narrates Rollin's account of why a "new" commonsense animal ethic is needed (chapter 1), how it can be brought about (chapters 2 and 3), what "common sense" has to say about animal minds in contrast with what post-Cartesian science has held (chapter 4), and how the common sense view accords with an Aristotelian ethic centering on the concept of telos (chapter 5). Part two, "Ideology and Common Sense," continues his critique of scientific skepticism of animal minds (chapters 6 and 7), further develops the common-sense telos-based ethic (chapter 8), and applies this ethic to the cases of factory farming, animal research, genetic engineering, and (quite briefly) zoos (chapters 9-12). Whatever the logic of this structure, I would organize the book's content into three themes: ethics (Introduction and chapters 1, 5, and 8-12), pragmatics (2 and 3), and science (chapters 4, 6, and 7).

Rollin's core ethical claim is that our moral obligations to animals are rooted in what matters to them, which is a function of the kinds of animals they are and the needs that animals of those kinds evolved to have — in a word, their *telos*. As he puts it,

Animals ... have basic needs and interests constitutive of their nature, or telos, which we as a society believe should not be overridden for human good. As Aristotle pointed out, living beings have unique strategies for solving the problems inherent in living — sensing, moving, reproducing, nourishing themselves — the thwarting of which matters to them.... The Aristotelian notion of telos thus becomes central to animal ethics. (55)

In terms of the traditional divide in animal ethics between, on the one hand, welfarists (who argue for better treatment of animals in agriculture, research, zoos, etc.) and, on the other hand, rights theorists (who claim such practices violate animal rights regardless of how humane we make them), Rollin is firmly in the welfarist camp. What distinguishes him within that camp is his emphasis on telos as providing a richer conception of animals' interests, "beyond the narrow restrictions of pleasure and pain" (55). Telos, he says, "provides an excellent shield against the sorts of rationalizations that confinement agriculturalists in particular have given in defense of keeping animals in highly restrictive and impoverished environments" (55). It is not sufficient to ensure they are housed, fed, watered, and spared gratuitous pain (as factory farmers claim) if at the same time they are prevented from expressing instincts for, e.g., foraging, rooting, hunting, nesting, nurturing, and socializing in ways characteristic of their species. Rollin targets factory farming as especially egregious in this regard, but also applies the point to zoo enclosures, laboratory housing, and so on.

Rollin doesn't think there's anything wrong with the use of animals for food per se, maintaining that traditional livestock husbandry (now all but eclipsed by industrial agriculture) was "a fair contract between humans and animals, with both sides benefiting from the ancient contract represented by domestication" (86). Nor does he oppose our *altering* a species's telos through genetic engineering if doing so makes the resulting animals better off. What matters is not *that* we have altered a species's telos, subordinating their nature to our own purposes, he argues, but whether such alterations result in diminished animal welfare.

Anyone looking for a radical critique of human domination of other species or calls for the abolition of systemic practices of animal use and oppression will thus have to look elsewhere. Rollin is a proud incrementalist, advocating for the significant change that is already implicitly embedded in ordinary moral common sense, not for a fundamental rethinking of the categories of "human" or "animal." He aligns in this respect with animal advocates like Henry Spira and Temple Grandin who are known for working directly with those they seek to change rather than primarily against them and for prioritizing concrete improvements in animal welfare over principled moral stances. He characterizes his pragmatic philosophy as "judo" by contrast with argumentative "sumo" (31-35) and likens it to Plato's view that moral education occurs by reminding people of what they already believe (and pointing out the logical implications of those beliefs) rather than teaching them what to believe.

There's much to be said for the incrementalist argument, as well as the point that common sense moral thought is more than sufficient to condemn practices like factory farming. But I was disappointed by Rollin's inclination to scoff at ethical views that are much more demanding or radical than the mainstream "social consensus." He criticizes Peter Singer, for instance, on grounds that his positions fail to "resonate with people's already held beliefs," are therefore "impracticable" and thus "more silly than anything else" (12). He writes:

Singer himself has argued, for utilitarian reasons, that the only way to ameliorate the suffering of farm animals raised in industrial animal factories is to stop eating meat and adopt a vegetarian if not vegan diet. A moment's reflection reveals the implausibility of that suggestion. People will not give up steaks, hot dogs, and hamburgers even when counseled to do so by their physicians to improve their own health or event to save their own lives, so the chances that they will do so in the face of a philosophical argument are vanishingly small. (12)

Never mind that Singer no longer seems to hold, if he ever did, that adopting vegetarianism is "the only way to ameliorate the suffering of farm animals." He endorses a much more flexible dietary ethic in *The Way We Eat: Why Our Food Choices Matter*, co-authored with Jim Mason. And never mind that plenty of people regularly do decide to give up meat eating on the basis of moral arguments; Singer's writing is widely recognized as having persuaded millions of readers to do just that. Far from "impracticable," many would cite *Animal Liberation* as the book that has had the greatest worldly impact of any work by a living philosopher. More fundamentally, it's far from obvious that palatability to popular common sense is the "strong constraint" on the *philosophical plausibility* of a new ethic (8) that Rollin asserts it to be. Indeed, there's quite a rich philosophical literature on what's called the question of morality's *demandingness* — the extent to which a new ethic can call for dramatically different obligations than hitherto acknowledged by commonsense before giving up claims to plausibility —, a literature with profound significance for the climate crisis as well as animal ethics. But Rollin doesn't discuss the broader literature in contemporary ethical theory; in fact, he announces his lack of interest in ethical theory in the book's Introduction (1-3). Nor does he contend with arguments opposing incrementalism that he would be sure to find in the practical ethics or wider Human Animal Studies literature. Eventually, it dawned on me that *A New Basis* is simply not a project in that kind of academic engagement.

The theory of social change that Rollin proffers in chapters two and three presumably grew out of his experience employing the “judo” method, both in the classroom and in the public sphere, examples of which are provided throughout the text. He maintains (not quite persuasively), that this reminding vs. teaching distinction explains the successful strategy that Martin Luther King, Jr. and Lyndon Johnson used in the Civil Rights Era:

[Johnson] realized that the social zeitgeist had progressed to the point that most Americans, even most southerners, accepted two fundamental premises, one ethical and one factual. The ethical assumption was that all humans should be treated equally in society, and the factual assumption was that blacks are humans. The problem was that many people had never bothered to put the two premises together and draw the inevitable conclusion, namely, that blacks should be treated equally. Johnson believed that if this simple deduction were put into law at that particular time, most people would “remember” and be prepared to bow to the inevitable conclusion. (34)

Indeed, Rollin attributes much of the social progress of the past 60 years to this sort of “Platonic ethical recollection regarding the ignored consequences of our accepted social ethic” (34).

I found myself wondering here what my colleagues in history and social science would have to say about such claims. Indeed, I wondered why Rollin would look for an explanation of 20th century social change in the work of Plato rather than in the research of historians, sociologists, anthropologists, or political scientists. No doubt Rollin has much lived experience of persuading audiences to their surprise that they already agree with him that their everyday practices are indefensible by their own lights — like a magician pulling a coin from behind their collective ears. But it doesn’t appear to occur to him that these experiences might have more to do with the way his charismatic swagger appeals to the Colorado State University Rodeo Club (32-33) than it does with a theory of social change based on timely reminders regarding simple modus ponens arguments in ethics. Or that his experiences in the teaching and practice of philosophy might not be a sufficient basis for a theory of social change. Perhaps radical confrontations have had and will continue to have more to do with social progress than Rollin quite realizes.

Rollin's third theme is that the practice of science has been corrupted by an ideology that conflicts deeply with common sense about the reality of animal minds, about the place of values in scientific practice, and about the ethics of animal research. "It generally takes a PhD, MD, or DVM degree to evidence skepticism about animal mind" (41), as Rollin drolly puts it. These are fairly well-rehearsed arguments and struck me as perhaps a bit dated. One of his arguments for the ethical illiteracy of scientists, for instance, begins as follows: "Just how extraordinarily incapable scientists *are* of responding to rational ethical argument was driven home to me when I ran a long session on animal ethics and legislation at a 1982 national meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Laboratory Animal Science ..." (emphasis added, 66-67). Perhaps appearances are misleading to those of us who teach in small liberal arts colleges, but these feel like old battles, largely long since won. Rollin, who has had a major hand in those victories, seems skeptical that the ideology of value-free science has been defeated or that more recent interest in ethics expressed by scientific bodies is genuine (75-76). Regardless, we do still have to disabuse undergraduates of some naive positivistic assumptions about science, and except for a tendency to cast rather sweeping aspersions on the scientific community, Rollin's arguments are well framed for that purpose. I especially enjoyed chapter 7, "Anecdote, Anthropomorphism, and Animal Mind," in which Rollin recounts the process by which mainstream science came to reject any testimonial accounts of animal behavior that presupposed consciousness — such as those famously made by Jane Goodall — as illegitimate anthropomorphizing.

What I was looking for substantively and didn't find in *A New Basis for Animal Ethics* is, well, a new basis for animal ethics — that is, new in relation to other work in the field that has been released in the past two decades or so. Rollin positions his approach to animal ethics as "new" in relation to two "existing" approaches: first, an anti-cruelty ethic associated with St. Thomas Aquinas and Immanuel Kant, and second, the utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, and Peter Singer (9-11). That certainly narrows the field of potential rivals, but at the cost of simply ignoring a huge and rich body of relevant scholarship. After the publication of *Animal Liberation* with its emphasis on animal welfare in 1975 and Tom Regan's *The Case for Animal Rights* in 1984, there was arguably a lull in foundational scholarship while the rights and welfare schools duked it out. When I picked up *A New Basis*, I anticipated Rollin joining the wave of more recent approaches that have attempted to reconcile, supercede, or otherwise carve out a space in relation to these two dominant approaches. The field of animal ethics is now occupied not only by the Kantian rights tradition and the Benthamic utilitarian tradition, but by well developed approaches based in the philosophies of contractarianism (Rowlands), feminist care theory (Donovan & Adams),

pluralist principles (Palmer), empathy (Gruen), citizenship theory (Donaldson & Kymlicka 2011) and two approaches that seem quite congenial to Rollin's — pragmatism (McKenna and Light) and the telos-like capabilities approach (Nussbaum). And that's just a small selection from the analytic side of the discipline. Rollin's *A New Basis* is simply not aiming to place his ideas in conversation with work by other contemporary animal ethicists (or even, for that matter, with the prior generation of scholarship, as Regan's theory of animal rights goes entirely without mention). Once again, it's a book for a popular audience rather than fellow researchers, with greater emphasis on conversational anecdotes than argumentative rigor.

Since I came to the book looking for formal philosophical rigor — for Rollin to engage with prominent objections that would emerge in the community of animal ethics scholars — I found his narrative asides distracting, at times even off-putting. He has a tendency to truck unhelpfully in ethnic and gender stereotypes — e.g., the Asian sage (11-12), the Ivy League Native American (128), feminine vanity (92-93). He is prone to universalizing from his perspective, failing to recognize the specificity of his own experience, asserting, for example: "We are all brought up under the same laws and the same Judeo-Christian ethic; we watch the same movies and television programs, read the same newspapers and magazines, and share major portions of culture" (34-35). In the course of rightly critiquing moral relativism, he unnecessarily (even embarrassingly, in the hindsight of the Trump era) endorses American exceptionalism: "In my view, the United States has developed the best mechanism in human history for maximizing both the interests of the social body and the interests of the individual" (25-26); suggests that we have achieved a state of Rawlsian justice in which "one's fate is mostly in one's own hands rather than being determined by irrelevant features such as accidents of birth"; and concludes that "current democratic societies ... seem to be continuing to evolve in the direction of greater fairness" (30). Finally, a great many of his personal anecdotes — particularly those involving dialogue with students and opponents — come off as self-aggrandizing: e.g., "'Please don't go,' [the student] said. 'We want to think this through. Rodeo means a lot to us. Will you help us think through how we can hold on to rodeo and yet not violate our ethic?'" [33]).

I couldn't help being disappointed by all this, because when Rollin is writing about animals, about scientific ideology, about the concept of telos and the core argument of the book, he can be clear, informative, engaging, and intellectually provocative in a good way. It's not hard to see how Rollin's character and approach — somewhat brash, staunchly defending "common sense" rather than anything revolutionary, esoteric, or



radical — would appeal to the thoughtful pig farmer mentioned in my introduction. For purposes of my animal ethics courses, though, I think I'll stick with his journal articles.

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