

# Liberalism and Animal Rights: An Interview with Sue Donaldson

In August 2014, the [Sydney Environment Institute](#) (SEI) and the [Human Animal Research Network](#) hosted a successful visit from [Will Kymlicka](#), Professor of Philosophy and Canada Research Chair in Political Philosophy at Queen's University. [Dinesh Wadiwel](#) caught up with [Sue Donaldson](#), co-author with Will Kymlicka, of the 2011 work [Zoopolis: A Political Theory of Animal Rights](#).

**Dinesh Wadiwel (DW):** *Will has recently given a hugely successful public lecture at the University of Sydney with the theme 'Animals and Social Justice.'* The Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Sydney, [Professor Duncan Ivison](#), asked an interesting question on whether your work in *Zoopolis* and beyond has not only applied citizenship to animals, but offered grounds for a deep rethink of the nature of citizenship itself in liberal democracies. Are you able to say more on this? Do you perceive that you are in fact offering a new theory of citizenship here?

**Sue Donaldson (SD):** Will loved his visit to Australia, by the way, and I regret that I was unable to join him. So thank you, Dinesh, for this opportunity to participate from afar. In answer to Duncan's question, I would say that Will and I aren't *offering* a new theory of citizenship so much as we are *embracing* (and applying) a new direction in citizenship theory, sometimes called the 'membership model', which has been advanced by feminist, disability and children's rights theorists and advocates in recent decades. Traditional idealized conceptions of citizenship often focus on required capacities of citizens – for example, the citizen should be a fully autonomous linguistic agent who meets threshold criteria for exercising rational judgment/deliberation, and independent agency and self-control via a sovereign will. On the membership conception, by contrast, citizenship is not a status awarded to individuals deemed to merit or require political rights because they (allegedly) possess certain traits or capacities. Rather, citizenship represents the commitment of a bounded, self-governing polis to recognize and enable the right of all members of that community to participate in shaping the shared terms of communal life. Citizenship tracks social membership, not shared rational/linguistic capacities, and part of what it means to recognize membership is to recognize the right of all members to have a say regarding the future of that community, in ways that are meaningful to them.

We believe this is a more compelling normative account of citizenship, since it opens up the possibility of citizenship that is genuinely plural yet still egalitarian. It includes all members of the political community on equal terms rather than positioning many as non-citizens, marginal-citizens, proto-citizens, or citizens by virtue of charitable inclusion. However, we would also insist that this membership model is a more descriptively accurate picture of how citizenship is actually enacted in today's world. Citizenship is not enacted solely through rational debate in a narrowly construed public sphere, but also through interdependent and embodied forms of agency and autonomy, and it often takes place in non-traditional political spaces and via non-traditional practices. Very few people, whatever their capacities, enact their citizenship solely through classical political practices such as voting, petition and town hall debate, so why should we insist that these practices set the contours for citizenship? We need to be far more creative about how we think about representation, participation, and responsibility. How do we bring citizenship to the spaces and places that are meaningful to the full diversity of community members? This membership model of citizenship is instantiated in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. And so, in *Zoopolis* we are offering not a new conception of citizenship, nor one that is tied specifically to the recognition of animal citizens. It is, however, fair to say that we are embracing a contested conception of citizenship, though it is one that has been compellingly elaborated and defended by a broad spectrum of theorists and policy makers representing many cultures, jurisdictions, and groups demanding inclusion.

**DW:** *Following on from this, I am curious about whether you have any thoughts on the relationship between liberalism and animal rights, and whether your work presents a challenge to the foundations of liberalism? Firstly, liberalism has predominantly been humanist in its orientation, so obviously any theory which includes consideration of animals must address the implicit humanism of liberalism. In some respects I think your work in Zoopolis does this very directly. Secondly, there is a deeper and perhaps more interesting issue for me here. Many conceptions of liberalism rely upon the notion of the autonomous, rational (and human) subject as a foundation – John Rawls' A Theory of Justice is an example of this. Zoopolis does something quite different, in sidestepping a requirement for this normatively defined rational human decision-maker to be present in order to construct a meaningful community (human or otherwise). Finally, Zoopolis also asks us to consider the 'margins' (that is those who are exposed and made vulnerable to systems of domination) as a starting point for a theory of justice, rather than the 'centre' - an approach I think both of you have continued exploring in your further work on multiculturalism and animals, Aboriginal rights and disability rights. Do you believe animal rights theory demands a fundamental change in direction and approach of liberalism itself?*

**SD:** I'm glad you followed up with this question. Mainstream political theorists sometimes accuse me and Will of offering such a radical reinterpretation of liberalism that it really ceases to be recognizably 'liberal' at all. By contrast, those on the radical left often say we are complacently peddling tired old liberal concepts, unable to think outside the liberal box. Ruth Abbey has noted that this sort of dual reaction to revisionist liberal thinking has a long historical pedigree. Ever since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, core liberal commitments have been reinterpreted by each new generation, and by each new group demanding inclusion and recognition, in ways that, to some, involve a betrayal of those original commitments, and to others, involve only a superficial or cosmetic change to them. For example, when liberal feminists first challenged liberalism's traditional public/private split and gendered division of labour – demanding reproductive rights, publicly funded childcare, and an end to patriarchal legal structures, discrimination, bias and other barriers to achieving political participation and equal opportunity – they were simultaneously accused of both abandoning and re-inscribing core liberal values. Taken together, all these reinterpretations have certainly moved us far from the original vision of society and politics in, say, John Locke or Immanuel Kant, and yet today, many people in western democracies would see these developments, like gender equality, as core commitments or elucidations of liberalism. The proposal to recognize animal citizenship would clearly take yet another big step away from historical liberal theory and practice. Yet there is an intelligible continuity in this development (as in earlier ones): it engages with the liberal tradition to determine what within that tradition remains relevant and worthy of allegiance, and what needs to be reconstructed.

As a result, the liberal goal posts keep shifting in ways that critics often find frustrating. Older liberal ideas of atomistic autonomy are decisively refuted, yet newer 'relational' forms of liberal autonomy are articulated; older liberal ideas of the sovereign will are refuted, yet newer embodied and intersubjective conceptions of liberal agency and responsibility emerge; older liberal ideas of political representation as a transparent mirror of pre-existing interests or beliefs are refuted, and then newer ideas of liberal political representation as deliberative, constructive and creative emerge. Even the species supremacism of liberal humanism recedes, replaced by a focus on forms of embodied consciousness and experience that are continuous with other animals. The polis becomes a zoopolis, and so on. All of these developments depart from influential features of the liberal tradition, yet each in its own way seeks to make good on the promises of liberalism, liberating liberal values from outdated assumptions and constraints.

Is there a point at which we should say this is no longer liberalism? I don't see why. Liberalism has always been, and will always be, a contested tradition, with ongoing disputes about which parts of this contested legacy are worth defending, revising or abandoning. There is no canonical set of meanings, and no expectation of ultimate consensus, but rather an ongoing process of debate, expansion of moral and political imagination, persuasion and renewal. I think the debate about liberalism as a concept is well illustrated in comparison with the changing concept of marriage. Conservative critics of gay marriage say it's not marriage. Radical critics of gay marriage say it's cooptation into an inherently conservative and bourgeois institution. There may be some truth to both of these charges, but they are increasingly irrelevant, at least in liberal democracies. The meaning of the institution of marriage has changed, and will

continue to change as the debate shifts to new ground. The institution has a resiliency and flexibility – a capacity for meeting certain deep human interests and dreams while being open to transformation of its central meanings and practices. I tend to view liberal political theory in similar terms.

**DW:** *While animal utilisation and exploitation did not begin with capitalism, arguably capitalism has facilitated an extraordinary expansion in the use of animals for human benefit, often driven by the incentive for continuing profits. Different strains of liberalism have taken differing critical approaches to the questions relating to the legitimacy of the market system and the role of State regulation in mitigating the excesses of capitalism. Have you both had time to consider how the critique your offer in Zoopolis has implications for thinking about capitalism and its role with respect to the domination of animals?*

**SD:** Bringing about Zoopolis would challenge capitalism in two different ways, which are worth distinguishing. First, it would entail a profound shift away from viewing the more-than-human-world as 'property' or 'resource'. It would entail shifting billions of creatures from the category of property, commodity or resource to rights-bearing individuals and communities. The bodily integrity, freedom, and necessities of life for all of those individuals would become shielded from market forces. Just as states today forbid individuals from buying and selling other humans, so too they would be tasked with viewing animals as persons not property. This would obviously be a direct challenge to many of the largest corporations in the world who depend on treating animals as property and resource. (And not just the direct producers of animal-based products, but also to the chemical, energy, transport, biomedical, food and fashion industries that work in partnership with animal use industries). But it's worth noting that capitalism has previously adapted to changes in society's rules about what or who can and cannot be owned, bought and sold. Some capitalist firms depended on human slavery or on child labour, but capitalism as such did not depend on commodifying human life or on commodifying child labour, and capitalism managed to survive even when human slaves and child labour were removed (legally, though not yet fully in practice) from the marketplace. Put another way, capitalism adapts to whatever limits society sets on the sorts of beings and entities that can be commodified. If and when society says that animals are not property, and cannot be bought and sold, then capitalism will adapt.

But we would argue that Zoopolis raises an even deeper challenge, which is less about the logic of commodification, and more about the ideology of growth and development. Recognizing the citizenship and sovereignty rights of animals takes us far beyond ending our direct harm and exploitation of animals. It requires that we share space, resources and opportunities with animals. The 'empty' lot across from my house, the river that runs through my city, the suburban woods and hedgerows, the dwindling wilderness beyond – these spaces are occupied by animal residents who have a right to be there, and to live unmolested and on terms of fair coexistence with us. This means, quite simply, an end to 'growth' capitalism as we know it – an end to the cycle of development and expansion that treats the world as resource for human use. In Zoopolis we call for a complete prohibition on any further usurpation of wild animal territory, and indeed a gradual contraction of the human footprint to make space for non-humans.

The only sort of capitalism that could survive, therefore, would be 'zero-growth' capitalism, or even 'contraction' capitalism, and this clearly poses a radical challenge. Capitalism has thrived in part on the promise of ever-expanding affluence based on the ever-expanding exploitation of resources. It's not clear what capitalism would look like if it renounced the ideology of growth. On the other hand, it should be noted that the ideology of growth is arguably part of modernity itself, and not just in capitalist societies. Communism was equally addicted to the ideology of growth, as have been virtually all the post-colonial states, whatever their professed allegiance to capitalism, communism, socialism, nationalism, or any mix of these. It is not just capitalists who will resist abandoning the ideology of growth, and we face a much broader cultural and political challenge to persuade human societies to contract our footprint.

And there may even be ways in which (some aspects of) capitalism can help in this cultural shift. After all, it will require a considerable amount of innovation, flexibility and risk-taking, of the sort that capitalist entrepreneurship can sometimes provide. In addition to making space for non-humans, recognizing the citizenship and denizenship of those animals who live amongst us in human-built environments would

transform the way we build and inhabit our communities, and distribute the benefits of communal life. These spaces would come to reflect the needs and interests and participation of all members of the community. There is enormous scope here for creative design, much of it by public authorities but also by private entrepreneurs. Indeed, I think grassroots entrepreneurship is an important site for animal advocacy and progressive change.

So, if the question is whether recognizing animal rights would require extensive regulation of the economy (to ensure robust protection of individuals and public goods, fair distribution of profits, non-externalization of costs, etc.), then the answer is yes, just as all of these things are required for the recognition of human rights. If the question is whether recognition of human/animal rights is consistent with certain forms of private enterprise, entrepreneurship and markets as part of a mixed economy or social-market economy, then the answer is also yes. Indeed, I think a thriving (nimble, creative) small business community can be a key player in countering the power of corporate capitalism.

I'm not sure if this answers your question. As a left liberal I am a strong critic of unfettered capitalism. But where I probably differ from radical left critics of liberalism is that I believe that animal rights, like human rights, can reform existing capitalist structures from within the liberal democratic state apparatus. Many critics on the radical left dismiss 'rights' as empty rhetoric. I think this is a careless, and dangerous, overstatement. It's true that rights are often hollow, their promise often unfulfilled. It's true that progressive change is agonizingly slow, and frustratingly fragile and reversible. But, to be honest, I'm not sure what the alternative is. Moreover, in my 50+ year lifetime many liberal democracies have witnessed genuine, sometimes stunning, improvements in the lives of women, people with disabilities, gays & lesbians, minorities and indigenous peoples. I am deeply grateful to the women and men who fought for the rights that have made all the difference in my own life, and the lives of so many others. These profound changes are possible, and I want them for animals. No one should have to wait for a revolution before they have rights.

**DW:** *Animal rights activists have come under a lot of pressure in some countries, particularly through the use of aggressive forms of criminalisation (such as Ag-Gag laws) to restrict some animal advocacy strategies. In the face of these challenges, I am curious on your thoughts about concrete strategies available for animal rights advocacy, and how it might be possible to bring about meaningful change within a liberal democratic framework?*

**SD:** I see the implementation (or attempted implementation) of Ag-Gag and other illiberal and anti-democratic forms of legal intimidation as an indication of the growing effectiveness of the animal protection movement. It can be frightening and devastating for individuals caught up by these oppressive authoritarian tactics. Consider the Austrian activists charged a couple of years ago with criminal coercion for emailing a store to inform the owners about prospective peaceful anti-fur demonstrations. Several activists spent months in pre-trial detention before enduring one of the longest trials in the history of the second Republic. They were acquitted on all charges, a result which was appealed by the state. The re-trials also resulted in acquittals on all charges. Now, some of the activists, financially devastated from this abuse of power, are filing claims for compensation. So, activists face frightening persecution, and serious costs, due to anti-democratic legislation.

However, the Austrian case also demonstrates how the animal movement can turn these moments to our advantage through publicity, democratic action and coalition-building. The ridiculous overreach by the government seriously damaged its credibility, and undermined support for animal use industries. Animal activists now have a high profile and approval rating in Austria, and veganism is growing by leaps and bounds. During the trials, *thousands* of individuals submitted self-indictments – i.e. they sent the same kinds of emails that had resulted in the original charges and pointed out that they, too, should be charged. That in itself is a major victory. And it shows that we are learning, as a movement, how to leverage our opportunities – especially the possibilities for alliance with pro-democracy advocates. The sad fact is that there are many people who don't care very much about animal rights, but who care deeply about democratic values. These are the people who finally joined the anti-slavery movement when southern

states trampled abolitionists' democratic rights of free speech and petition, or who took notice of the civil rights movement after seeing nightly newscasts of children being beaten up by police officers. These are the kinds of folks we can bring to the animal cause through carefully planned civil disobedience. We need effective support networks for activists who take on this work. And we need to be ready with a communication strategy, financial aid, and alliance-building strategies.

Many people worry about the chill effect of ag-gag laws, but I'm not sure how real this phenomenon is. According to Mercy for Animals (which funds undercover operations in factory farms) they have more volunteers than they can employ. So, brave people are stepping up despite bullying tactics to shut them down and shut them up. They see the vulnerabilities of the animal-industrial complex, and the potential of thoughtful and nonviolent political action and civil disobedience.

I think that another key area for activism is grassroots creation of the communities of the future. Many people would like to be vegan, and would like to live in a world that is better for animals, but they can't make it a practical reality in their daily lives. There is no animal-friendly institution to employ them. And no animal-friendly pension plan to sign on to. They don't live in a metropolis with bountiful vegan options for eating, clothing, etc. There are practical limits to how much they can reduce their carbon footprint. They live in a daily environment which saturates them with the message that animals are expendable and usable. They don't have the time and psychic energy to be an 'outlier' in their family and social circles. To date, a lot of animal advocacy has focused on changing individual beliefs, but beliefs are only part of the equation. Even when people believe in their heart of hearts that animals are persons, they face serious limits on how much they can or will change their behaviour in an essentially hostile environment. So we need to change that environment. At a very grassroots level we need to make it possible for people to live in an animal-friendly social community – with animal-friendly schools, and jobs, and businesses, and city councils, and public spaces, and social services. We need to make it easy for people to see, to imagine, and to transition to the communities of the future without worrying that it's going to put them into ongoing conflict with their family, friends, colleagues and neighbours.

I should probably add here that Will, in general, is more pessimistic than I am about the prospects for genuine change for animals in the not-too-distant-future. And I understand this, given the entrenched power of the animal-industrial complex, ever increasing levels of violence towards animals, and the rapidly deteriorating environmental outlook. But I take some comfort from the fact that the future is remarkably (frighteningly, exhilaratingly) hard to predict. I can't help thinking that we might be in one of those 'the emperor has no clothes' moments. The imperium of the animal-industrial complex looks to be intact, but its aura is being stripped away. Maybe it's ripe for toppling.

**DW:** *During Will's recent visit to Sydney, he mentioned that you both are interested in farm sanctuary movements, as an example of the kind of experiments that practically explore conceptions of animal citizenship. Can you talk more about your interest in these movements: their potential and their limits?*

**SD:** We had a wonderful opportunity this summer to visit the original Farm Sanctuary – the mother ship, as it were - in upstate New York, as well as several more recently established sanctuaries for (formerly) farmed animals in our region. (Just to clarify, I am talking about genuine sanctuaries here, not the countless petting zoos and other back yard operations which describe themselves as 'sanctuaries' but are designed for humans not animals. I'm talking about communities which are premised on animal rights philosophy and which view themselves as part of the animal rights movement.)

The number of sanctuaries is expanding rapidly (in North America and Europe, and, I would imagine, Australia), and Will and I are very interested in the politics of these communities, and how they perceive their role in the animal rights movement. One question is: Do sanctuaries view themselves primarily as places of refuge – places of safety and transition until we bring about the demise of industrial farming? Another way of asking this is, are they places 'outside of' society? Or are they intentional communities where we *model* the society we want – exploring interspecies citizenship in practice? Locations of

exploration, more than reprieve, in other words. These aren't either/or options, of course, but it's fascinating to see how different sanctuaries describe their work and political role. Some are very focused on an educational model which entails attracting human visitors who will (hopefully) be transformed (e.g. become vegan) by seeing farm animals in less confined conditions, learning their stories, and interacting with them as unique individuals. These sanctuaries tend to prioritize a very high level of animal welfare – providing the animals with a safe, comfortable and loving permanent home – a reprieve from the horrors of farming. They don't tend to prioritize animals' agency, since they see themselves as non-ideal, temporary, institutions. They are focused on freedom from exploitation, not a more open-ended inquiry into the nature of freedom and the good life for domesticated animals.

Other sanctuaries, or 'intentional interspecies communities', are less focused on a public education mission. They see the animal residents, not primarily as recipients of care and educational ambassadors for the unlucky animals in the ag industry, but rather as fellow community members and pioneers with whom they are exploring new ways of living and working together – writing a road map to a better world. How do domesticated animals want to live, in relation to each other, and to us? Can we build environments in which they exercise meaningful control over those environments, their activities and their relationships? What will emerge under these conditions in terms of multi-species friendships and communities? What choices will animals make about how much contact they want with humans, and for what purposes? Will some animals welcome the opportunity to participate in activities that humans organize with them? Or will they opt for (supported) separation? Will and I have been thinking about these questions theoretically, but we were incredibly excited to discover that some sanctuaries are actually exploring these questions on the ground. It's extremely complicated. For one thing, providing animals with more freedom almost invariably means exposing them to more risk – of eating something noxious, of stumbling in rough terrain, of encountering a predator, of coming into conflict with another animal, and so on. The theoretical and practical challenges are enormous, but also incredibly exciting. What's particularly thrilling is that we are seeing new kinds of interspecies society emerge in these sanctuaries – societies in which pigs aren't just pigs, following a particular species blueprint, but genuine individuals, with enormous flexibility, adaptability, and curiosity about different social arrangements. This suggests that once we support animals' agency, we will have to abandon our inherited ideas of what's 'natural' for a pig, or turkey, or chicken. And this, in turn, will reshape our ideas of what we mean by 'friend', 'worker', 'family', 'citizen' and 'society'. We simply don't know what is possible. How extraordinary that we've never tried to find out!

I've been talking about farm sanctuaries, but there are of course many other kinds of sanctuaries and refuges, for injured wildlife, rescued zoo and marine park animals, wild animal communities in areas of ecological collapse, and so on. I think that some of the questions I've raised about farm sanctuaries can also be asked about these other kinds of sanctuaries. Are they transitional institutions? Or model communities? And what are the implications for how they engage with the animals there? I could talk about this all day, but I guess I should stop here.