## Humans and other animals

The relationship between humans and other animals – how we think about and treat them – has been the subject of debate for centuries. This debate has a serious academic basis as well as a public face, and has been strongly influenced by the views of world religions, philosophers, scientists and sociologists. The influence of such bodies has been crucial to the development of legislation and ethical 'codes of conduct' to protect both humans and animals and define how we should behave towards them.

Almost everyone would now agree that animals should not be cruelly treated. However, this was not always the case. In fact, prior to the 18th century, it was argued that animals could not suffer because they did not have a soul – souls and therefore suffering were thought to be unique to humans.

This view was put forward by the French scientist and philosopher **René Descartes** (1596-1650). He wrote about animals as if they were unfeeling machines, a concept that influenced thinking for over two centuries. (It is debatable whether Descartes actually believed animals could not suffer, but he certainly doubted things that could not be determined by 'reason alone'.)

In the 18th century this view began to be challenged, most notably in the writings of influential philosophers such as **Jeremy Bentham**. People started to become more concerned about the capacity of animals to suffer.

Concern for oppressed humans was also growing, which led to pressure for social reforms in the 19th century that encompassed both humans and animals. The **RSPCA** was the first animal welfare society in the world to be established, in **1824**.

In the 20th century, philosophical thinking about the nature of animal suffering and the relationship between humans and animals continued to develop, and these issues also began to be studied by psychologists and in the social sciences. In addition, much more was learnt about animals, their abilities, behaviour and capacity to suffer, and animal welfare emerged as a science in its own right. Together, these factors have contributed to developing moral codes, ethical standards and new legislation.

There is a new spectrum of views within western society on the status of animals and the priority they should be given in the many different contexts that humans interact with or use them. For example, in respect of food and farming, recreation, scientific research, wildlife and companionship.

There are a number of philosophical concepts relating to animals, but the two most general concepts are those of **animal rights** and **animal welfare**.

A philosophy of animal rights awards animals the same kind of rights as humans, including the right to live a life free from abuse and exploitation by humans. Taken to its limits, this would exclude keeping them as pets.

An animal welfare philosophy concludes that animals must be respected and that their welfare must be protected, but it does not award them rights in the same way as humans have rights. It argues that humans have responsibility for animals and that this includes not causing unnecessary suffering.

## **Further information:**

Animals and Human Society: Changing perspectives, edited by Aubrey Manning and James Serpell (1994), Routledge, London and New York. ISBN 0-415-09155-1

