Do animals have moral rights? In contrast to the philosophical gurus of the animal rights movement, whose opinion has held moral sway in recent years, Peter Carruthers here claims that they do not. *The animals issue* provides an admirably clear discussion of the role theoretical considerations have to play in determining our moral judgement. Carruthers explores a variety of moral theories, exposing the weaknesses of those that would accord rights to animals, and concluding that contractualism (in the tradition of Kant and Rawls) offers the most acceptable framework. From such a perspective animals lack direct moral significance. This need not entail of course that there are no moral constraints on our treatment of them.

This provocative but judiciously argued book is for all those interested in animal rights, whatever their initial standpoint. It will also serve as a lively introduction to ethics, demonstrating why theoretical issues in ethics actually matter.
THE ANIMALS ISSUE
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Moral theory in practice

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For Daniel

whose animal days are almost done
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Preface

The animal rights movement has gained considerable momentum in recent years, fuelled, in part, by the theoretical arguments of moral philosophers. Indeed, it is striking that almost all of the books and articles recently published on this issue have argued in favour of the moral standing of animals. This is not because the consensus amongst moral philosophers as a whole is that animals have rights. It is rather because, for one reason or another, most of those who take the opposite view have chosen to remain silent. This book is written in an attempt to redress the balance.

My view is that the case for the moral standing of animals is weak, and that the contrary case is, by contrast, very powerful. In fact, I regard the present popular concern with animal rights in our culture as a reflection of moral decadence. Just as Nero fiddled while Rome burned, many in the West agonise over the fate of seal pups and cormorants while human beings elsewhere starve or are enslaved. This reaction is, to a degree, understandable. For animal sufferers are always blameless, and the steps necessary to improve their situation are generally plain. Our response to human suffering, in contrast, is often complicated by the suspicion that the victims, or their political representatives, are at least partially responsible for their fate, and by knowledge of the fearsome complexity of the economic and social problems involved in such issues as famine relief. Whatever may have been true of Nero, our species of decadence may consist in a weakness for easy options, rather than in any failure of moral sensitivity.

The recent explosion of interest in animal rights has had a
variety of sources, no doubt, besides moral paralysis in face of the enormity of the world’s human problems. One such source may be the increasing urbanisation of Western culture that has dramatically diminished the extent of personal working contact with animals. The sentimentality that many people feel for their pets has thus come to spread itself over the whole animal domain. But another source has undoubtedly been intellectual. The philosophical gurus of the animal rights movement have managed to seize the moral high ground, charging those who oppose them with inconsistency or morally arbitrary speciesism. The main purpose of this book is to show that these charges can be rebutted. Besides exposing the implausibility of those theories that would grant rights to animals, I shall defend a theoretical framework that accords full moral standing to all human beings, while non-arbitrarily withholding such standing from animals.

In attacking those who attribute moral standing to animals, however, I am not opposing those who are animal lovers, as I explain in the opening chapter. Indeed, I count myself as belonging to the latter group. But it is one thing to love animals for their grace, beauty, and marvellous variety, and quite another to believe that they make any direct moral claims upon us. Nor should I be seen as placing myself in opposition to recent ecology movements. But my view is that rare species of animal and rain forests are worth preserving for their importance to us, not because they have moral significance, or moral rights, in their own right. Far from being strengthened, the ecology movement is only weakened by association with such extreme and indefensible views.

This book is aimed primarily at non-philosophers, in the sense that I try to take nothing for granted, and lay out my material as clearly and explicitly as I can. All I assume is that my readers are prepared to think while they read, and that they can follow the course of a rational argument. This does not mean, however, that I talk down to my audience. I do not write from any position of specialised knowledge or superior wisdom, but only as one who has tried to think honestly and openly about the issues. In any case, I belong to that breed of contemporary philosopher who holds that the life-blood of
Preface

philosophy is accessibility. Where philosophy retreats into technicality it withers and dies, and where it takes refuge in obscurity it only forms a rallying point for those who care nothing for truth.

I have two remarks to make about grammar. One is that although human beings are, strictly speaking, a species of animal, for reasons of simplicity I shall use the term ‘animal’, throughout, in such a way as to contrast with ‘human being’. When I therefore raise the question whether any animals have rights, what I am asking, in fact, is whether any non-human animals have rights. My second remark is political. Wherever necessary, I shall use the colloquial plural pronouns ‘they’ and ‘their’ in impersonal contexts in place of the pernicious masculine singular ‘he’ and ‘his’ required by strict English grammar. For I do not wish to endorse the impression that only men ever do or think anything worth mentioning. I find this option less distracting than the use of the feminine ‘she’ and ‘hers’ favoured by some writers. Yet it is less stylistically barbaric than ‘s/he’ and ‘his/hers’, and less unwieldy than the constant use of ‘he or she’ and ‘his or hers’.

As for my intellectual debts, it was originally through discussions with Clare McCready that I came to feel I had a distinctive approach to the question of animal significance, which might be worth putting down on paper. I am grateful to her for her strident but thoughtful opposition. Thanks also go to the following individuals for their comments and advice on previous drafts: David Archard, Stephen Buckle, Nick Bunnin, Daniel Dennett, Debbie Fitzmaurice, Peter Harrison, Jennifer Jackson, Susan Levi, Stephen Makin, Christopher McKnight, Susan Mendus, Onora O’Neill, Peter Singer, Robert Stern, Robert Wurtz, and an anonymous reader for Cambridge University Press. That I have not acknowledged their individual contributions in the pages that follow does not mean that they are not remembered – only that a text of this sort should be as uncluttered by scholarly apparatus as possible. I am also grateful to my students at the Queen’s University, Belfast, and the universities of Michigan, Essex, and Sheffield, on whom I tried out my ideas at various stages of their formation.