on religious grounds. Laborde’s test points to the question: Is Hobby Lobby an identificatory group? Some businesses might be: a kosher supermarket, a halal butcher, or a bible seller—but not a large chain store with 500 stores and 13,000 employees that sells arts and craft supplies.

The challenge for Laborde’s argument, which she briefly addresses (pp. 181–82), is that to show coherence and competence interests means that groups must be organized so as to have a coherent doctrine. Nonreligious groups can fit, but as a matter of fact it will often be religious groups that can press the state for exemptions, because they often have organizational structures with a clear doctrine. Some Eastern religions, like Hinduism, are often diffuse with little hierarchy, which means that Hinduism may have a harder time pressing for exemptions. This does not mean that the Western view of religion is Protestant, but it does mean that organizational structure is helpful (though not necessary) if courts are to decide whether an exemption is justifiable.

Liberals are often uneasy with exemptions, but in the last substantive chapter, Laborde defends individual exemptions. Dress codes, for example, should often make exemptions for people who are compelled to violate them to satisfy their religious conscience. But it is not that the conscience is religious that is doing the work, Laborde argues that we should think in terms of ethically salient commitments, particularly “integrity-protecting commitments” (IPCs). An IPC is a commitment, “manifested in a practice, ritual or action (or refusal to act), that allows an individual to live in accordance with how she thinks she ought to live” (pp. 203–204). Clearly, this will fit many religious commitments, but others who have nonreligious commitments will also fit—paciﬁsts, vegetarians, and so on.

Laborde lays out further tests for how to judge integrity-protecting commitments, which I will leave you to read for yourself. In some ways this is a book for the judiciary: it spells out how to determine whether claims for exceptions and exemptions should be allowed. Of course, the book is also much more than that, laying a vision for how religion and the liberal state should relate to one another. That Laborde’s argument is nuanced makes it hard to sum up concisely, but the relationship between associational life and the liberal state is a complicated one. There is no better place to come to an understanding of that relationship than Laborde’s superb book.


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Alasdair Cochrane has been at the forefront of the relatively small number of scholars who have sought to articulate what a genuinely “political” theory of animal rights might look like. This political turn has been one of the most important offshoots of the now long-standing animal ethics literature that, in the hands of Peter Singer and Tom Regan most notably, has sought to establish a significant moral status for nonhuman animals. The political turn seeks to analyze the political implications of this ethical position. The fundamental purpose of this book is therefore to ask “what a political order dedicated to the worth and rights of sentient animals (both human and nonhuman) would look like” (p. 140).

The scope of Cochrane’s account is both comprehensive and ambitious. After establishing (or, to be more accurate perhaps, stating) the ethical case for regarding all sentient beings as moral equals and therefore ruling out eating and experimenting on animals as morally impermissible, Cochrane goes on to “imagine, outline and defend what a political system dedicated to the sentence of animals—a ‘sentientist politics’—would look like” (p. 3). The ideal political system envisaged must be democratic, with human proxies elected to promote the interests of animals. It must also be a global political order with overlapping local, national, regional, and global communities of humans and nonhuman animals. Cochrane rejects a relational and group-based account, associated above all with Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka—whereby our moral obligations to domesticated animals are greater than those we owe to wild living animals—in favor of a cosmopolitan approach. Cosmopolitanism ensures the impartial treatment of all sentient beings whatever their gender, race, nationality, or species and, more specifically in the case of nonhuman animals, whether they are wild or domesticated. He thus rejects Donaldson’s and Kymlicka’s claims that wild living animals should have their own sovereign communities and that we do not have any positive duties of assistance to such animals.

There are a number of areas of Cochrane’s account that, I think, are particularly open to challenge. In the first place, he recognizes that his theory is “hopelessly idealistic” (p. 10) and indeed makes no apologies for this. It is nevertheless worthwhile noting that the extent of his ambition is truly profound. Envisaging a cosmopolitan democracy for only humans might be regarded by some as utopian, but Cochrane wants to go further and incorporate politically the interests of all sentient beings. He is right that there is a place for such ideal theorizing, but his claim that there are indicators that suggest a progression toward his preferred end goal can be challenged. Much, and perhaps too much, depends on contestable empirical claims about the reach of globalization. In the case of animals, it is certainly true that there are some examples of international bodies designed to uphold welfare standards and to conserve wildlife. For the most part, however, these are either anthropocentric in character—seeking to protect species of wild animals for human benefit—or only
subscribe to a welfarist position that assumes human moral superiority and thereby the right to exploit animals.

A related point is that, even if we bracket the feasibility question, some (particularly from the Critical Animal Studies Community) would criticize Cochrane’s neglect of the global economic power structures that underpin much institutional animal exploitation. Greater consideration of the economic constraints on the effective political incorporation of nonhuman interests and how they can be tackled would have been, at the very least, useful.

Another problem is the ethical foundation of Cochrane’s political theory. Much of his political analysis depends on the validity of the claim that all sentient beings are morally equal. Some of his arguments here are inevitably open to challenge. In particular, the claim that sentient nonhuman animals have a right to life equivalent to that possessed by humans does not sit well with his admission that most humans have a stronger interest in continued life. More to the point, however, is that Cochrane’s moral arguments—the development of an interest-based theory of animal rights—are familiar from his previous work: it might have been preferable to have assumed their validity here and devote more attention to the innovative political implications that he argues derive from them. What might also have been considered is an independent justification for the political inclusion of nonhumans. As it stands, if one rejects the view that the sentience of nonhumans is enough to ground a theory of animal rights, then the political inclusion of animals fails too. Interestingly, Cochrane uses the all-affected interests principle to justify a global theory of justice in which the role of states is minimized. He might also have considered using the principle to justify the democratic inclusion of animals on the grounds that the interests of animals are clearly affected by political decisions. In my view, although this principle requires the existence of sentence on the grounds that only sentient beings have interests, it does not require the more controversial claim that sentience generates moral equality.

Finally, in Cochrane’s account, states are no longer fundamental units of governance. This probably underestimates, however, the role that the state can play in a political theory of animal rights. It is true that a rejection of the state system would maximize the protection of animals, particularly wild living animals that are no respecters of national boundaries. Nevertheless, there is much that a state that recognizes the equal moral worth of all sentient beings and incorporates them politically—or one that approximates to that model—can do to protect its own sentient beings and to promote the interests of all sentient beings in all states. The claim that such a state will disregard or downplay the interests of sentient nonhuman animals in other states is an empirical one that can be contested.

Here, then, I am promoting the role of a reformist “sentientist state” along the lines of the Green state proposed by Robyn Eckersley. One advantage Eckersley claims for focusing on the state, thereby bucking the trend in Green political thought, is the pragmatic recognition that the state remains the most important form of political organization. Such an approach would seem to be equally applicable to a political theory of animal rights. It evades the accusation of utopian dreaming while at the same time avoiding the conservatism endemic in a mere description of the practices of existing states and suggestions for moderate reform that leave the exploitation of animals largely untouched.

In conclusion, this densely argued book undoubtedly breaks new ground and can be described as the first attempt to provide a comprehensive political theory of animal rights. There is much in it to applaud. Because of its innovative character, I am inclined to forgive what I think are the weaker elements of Cochrane’s account. It is up to others to build on his pioneering work and add to what is likely to become an important subfield of political theory.


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In this important new book, Richard Dagger wades into not one but two sprawling debates: the debate concerning the grounds of political obligation, on the one hand, and the debate concerning the justification of punishment, on the other. These two debates have developed mostly independently of one another in contemporary political theory and philosophy. According to Dagger, this division of labor is a mistake and a hindrance to efforts to resolve the central issues on either topic. The key to progress is recognizing that grounding political obligation and justifying punishment are in fact the same problem or, perhaps more precisely, flip sides of the same problem. As Dagger says on the very first page, surely “we have a right to punish lawbreakers” precisely because “we have a right to expect people to live up to their political obligations” (p. 1).

Once stated, the link between these two debates seems obvious. How is it that so few have perceived it? Or perhaps some have, but without seriously attempting to make anything of it. After all, the very scope and complexity of the two literatures present a daunting obstacle to anyone aiming to bridge them. All the more impressive, then, that Dagger has managed the feat with such success.