

Ethical Veganism in RE Supplementary Resource

Unit 3 (ages 10 to 12)

Should the Golden Rule include Animals?



'The Golden Rule'

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Note for teachers

Resource 1 re-iterates and builds on learning about Buddhism from Unit 2. If learners have not studied Unit 2, consider using Resource 2 from the Supplementary Resources for this Unit 2.

Resource 1

Should The Golden Rule apply to animals?

Key Ideas

Speciesism

Speciesism is the word used to describe the idea that humans treat some species of animals differently to others, without good reasons for doing so. The word 'speciesism' was coined in the 1960s by the psychologist Dr Richard Ryder. Some people argue that speciesism is a form of prejudice. Prejudice is when people make judgements about others before really getting to know them – pre-judging. Prejudice can lead to discrimination. Discrimination means acting on prejudice – treating someone differently, based on prejudice. We only usually think of prejudice and discrimination in terms of our relations with other human beings, but the idea of **speciesism** encourages people to question the ways in which we think about other animals and the impact this may have on them.

Clearly, many humans do treat some animals with lots of love and kindness, while accepting that other very similar animals do not deserve to be treated with the same kindness and that it may even be OK to treat them cruelly. A good example, in our society, would be dogs and pigs. These are two different but quite similar species: both are very intelligent, both like to play and interact with other animals and with people, too. However, in our society most people think about these two quite similar species of animals very differently! Dogs are usually given lots of care and affection. Many families think of their pet dogs as one of the family – an individual with their own quirks, likes and dislikes. On the other hand, many people don't see pigs as individuals, but as 'livestock', animals farmed for food. When people here in the UK hear of dogs being farmed for meat, which happens in other parts of the world, they are often outraged, and sometimes join in campaigns against this treatment of dogs. This is speciesism.

Lots of people misunderstand speciesism, thinking that it means that a person is **speciesist** if they don't give all animals, from human beings all the way through to, say, fruit flies, equal respect, consideration and place the same value on them all. This makes the idea of addressing speciesism seem rather impossible. This is because most people would value a human life more dearly than the life of a chicken... and the life of a chicken would be of more value to them than the life of a fruit fly. Does this mean that most people are speciesist, then? No, because there are many and enormous differences between these types of animals that justify – or, in other words, that explain with good reasons – why most people view these different species of animals in different ways. Speciesism happens only when there is no good reason to treat different species of animals differently.

There are lots of reasons why people may think and act in speciesist ways. It may be that it is simply convenient for people to treat one species of animal differently. For instance, a certain species of animal might have something that we like to eat (in the case of pigs, lots of people love pork sausages or bacon), wear, or sell for some other use. Or, it might be the case that using an animal in a particular way that causes it harm has been done for many years and has become a normal part of the way we live, so much so, that we don't even think about it – it is part of culture or tradition. People may also treat similar but different

species of animals differently based on their beliefs and assumptions about what certain species of animals are like. Sometimes these assumptions are true and sometimes they are not.

Look back at the 10 pictures from the PowerPoint resource. Can you see speciesism at play in any of these examples?

Sentience

Nowadays, we have much greater knowledge and understanding of how our fellow earthlings experience the world we share with them. We benefit from scientific evidence which tells us that most animals can feel pain and fear, they seek pleasure, and try to avoid pain and discomfort. Many animals form bonds with other animals and often with people as well. Animals that have these sorts of qualities are often called 'sentient beings'. It is not just mammals and land animals who are sentient, but also creatures that live in water, too, like fish, eels, octopi and so on.

In times gone by, it was often argued that, because animals aren't as intelligent as humans, and can't speak to us to communicate their thoughts and feelings, it was fine to treat them as we please. Now, there is much more focus on the extent to which an animal is aware of their surroundings, including responding to other beings, can feel pain, anticipate threat, seek pleasure and so on. A famous philosopher from the eighteenth century, Jeremy Bentham, used the idea of sentience to argue that animals deserved to be treated with care and compassion and even have the right to be protected by the law. He said:

"The question is not, can they reason?, nor can they talk? but, can they suffer? Why should the law refuse its protection to any sensitive being? ... The time will come when humanity will extend its mantle over everything which breathes."

Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, 1789

What do some religions have to say on these matters?

Human uniqueness and dominion

Religious reasons are sometimes used to justify treating other animals as inferior to us and may emphasise the differences between people and other animals, and perhaps encourage people to overlook the things people and other animals share in common. Looking, for example, at Judaism and Christianity, the Book of Genesis tells Jewish people and Christians about how God created the world and everything in it. It describes humans as being made 'in the image of God', and how God gave humans **dominion**, meaning they can rule over all other living things. According to the Book of Genesis, then, humans are to be regarded as superior to other living things and separate from them. Because only humans were made in the image of God, many people have seen this as showing that only humans have a soul. Over the centuries, people may have seen this as a way of justifying using animals as they please. However, many Jewish people and Christians alike, including the Pope, have challenged this view, saying that people have a duty to care for the creatures God created. Ruling over the world does not mean being cruel or causing unnecessary pain or death to other

animals, but rather a duty to be in charge of the world, in a responsible and caring way, valuing and honouring all of God's creation.

In the Torah – which are the books of Jewish Law as well as being the first five books of the Christian Bible, there are many laws from God which encourage people to treat animals with care, compassion and kindness. These rules do not stop people from using animals for food and other purposes, but there are special regulations that must be followed to show consideration to animals to minimise any pain or distress they might feel. Many Jewish people still follow these rules strictly. There are also rules about which animals may or may not be used for food. In Islam and Judaism, pigs are regarded as unclean, and so meat from pigs is not eaten by Jewish people or Muslims.

Oneness of all beings

In contrast, Dharmic religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism emphasise the connections between all beings. Animals and people are all interconnected in the cycle of samsara (the cycle of birth, death and rebirth), although some people argue that the higher status of human life over other forms of animals causes a separation between humans and other animals. Hindus and Sikhs believe that there is a spark of the Divine in every living thing. The principle of ahimsa, which means not causing harm, for many Hindus and Buddhists, applies to all living things.

Resource 2

Who are vegans and what might they say about including animals in the Golden Rule?



Image:Pixabay

This is the Vegan Society's definition of veganism:

'Veganism is a way of living which seeks to exclude, as far as possible and practicable, all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for food, clothing or any other purpose'

[\(The Vegan Society\)](#)

Vegans are people who try their best to live their lives without causing any unnecessary harm to animals. This means that they take practical steps such as not eating meat, eggs or dairy products, and not using products that contain ingredients obtained from animals or that are tested on animals.

When you think of veganism, you might just think about food. There is certainly lots of vegan food available these days, as well as lots of vegan cafés and restaurants popping up. However, being vegan is much more than just a diet. It is a set of beliefs, and a way of life. It might be called a 'worldview'. Of course, there are people who might stick to vegan food for health reasons, or because they just prefer to eat that way, or for lots of other reasons who do not share with vegans the same concerns about how humans treat animals. These people may still continue to wear leather, or wool or use products that contain animal ingredients. It's more accurate to say that these people follow a 'plant-based diet'. Being vegan affects not only what a person can eat or drink, but many other areas of their day-to-day life as well, including what they wear, what they can do with their free time and perhaps even what career they choose.

Veganism is not about being 100% perfect! Vegans know that it is impossible to live without causing any harm whatsoever to any animal at all. Even growing and farming crops to make food causes harm and death to lots of small animals like rodents and insects, but we do need to eat plants to survive. Far fewer crops are needed just to feed people than are needed to feed to animals to be killed to be fed to people, as well as animals used to produce eggs or milk. So, choosing not to eat meat, eggs or dairy is not a perfect solution, but vegans see it as the way to reduce harm and suffering as much as possible.

Discussion point

Spend some time, as a class, thinking about whether a vegan would take part in the following activities. Which would be fine for a vegan. For those that don't fit with veganism, what might a vegan do instead?

- eating a beef burger
- drinking a milkshake
- visiting a zoo
- baking a cake with three large eggs
- buying a pet from a pet shop
- taking medicine needed for a serious medical condition

Do vegans all share the same beliefs?

All vegans share the belief that harming animals unnecessarily is wrong, and that life should be lived in such a way as to avoid as much harm as possible, but they may differ on certain issues, including how best to achieve the goal of causing the least harm to animals.

Some vegans are religious, and some are not at all religious. There are vegans who belong to all the major world religions we study in RE. Many religious vegans see their commitment to veganism as an expression of their faith and spirituality and a way of honouring the teachings of their religion, whilst others may see being vegan as unconnected with their religion, but still compatible with it. What unites all vegans is that it is a way of life based on compassion for animals, and concern for the environment. Vegans can be from all walks of life, all different faiths or of no faith at all, and there are vegans from many different cultures around the globe. As you might expect, vegans don't agree on absolutely everything and they may differ on some of the details around what it means to be vegan. Vegans may also have very different views in other areas of their life, like politics and so on.

Do vegans think that the Golden Rule should apply to other animals as well as to humans?

It is impossible to answer this on behalf of all vegans, but it would be fair to say that most vegans would want to see humans widening their circle of compassion to include non-human animals as well as people. Vegans think carefully about how animals are used by humans, trying as much as possible to empathise with them, which means doing the best to see things from the animals' point of view. In this way, they try not to do to other animals what they would not want for themselves. Of course, vegans would keep in mind that animals have different wants and needs to those of human beings, whilst recognising that often the basic needs and wants of animals are the same as ours, e.g. a good environment to live in, freedom from fear, threat, pain and discomfort. Using empathy, vegans would be likely to think along these lines: If I were, say, a cow/pig/sheep/fish (etc), how might I like to live? How might I want to be treated if I were this animal? What might I try to avoid happening to me if I were this animal? And they would try to live considering how their choices and actions could help make life less difficult for animals. In this way, it is fair to say that vegans would be in favour of extending the Golden Rule to include animals.

Vegans argue that all sentient animals deserve respect, compassion and kind treatment, and wish to avoid causing any unnecessary suffering or death to any sentient animal. They disagree that animals who are farmed for food and other commodities are simply 'livestock', seeing them instead as individuals with unique characteristics, needs and desires. Vegans challenge speciesist ideas that have become part of the cultures people live in and want people to treat animals in ways that respect their needs, desires and feelings. So, in this way as well, vegans are applying the Golden Rule to animals as well as to humans.