

PULSE faq

Whether you're a staunch microbe rights advocate, an activist who's just getting started, or a complete skeptic, you can use these answers to help clarify your understanding of the microbe rights movement. The responses presented here are by no means the only answers to these frequently asked questions. They are simply intended to provoke you to think about common assumptions and to serve as a resource as you formulate your own opinions.

"What do you mean by 'microbe rights'?"

People who support microbe rights believe that microbes are not ours to kill, use for food, experiment on, etc. and that microbes deserve consideration of their best interests regardless of whether they are "gross", harmful to humans, or contagious and regardless of whether any human cares about them at all (just as a mentally challenged human has rights even if he or she is ugly or reckless and even if everyone dislikes him or her).

"What rights should microbes have?"

Microbes should have the right to equal consideration of their interests. For instance, a bacterium most certainly has an interest in not being slaughtered for the comfort of another. We are, therefore, obliged to take that interest into consideration and to respect the bacterium's right not to be slaughtered unnecessarily. However, microbes don't always have the same rights as humans because their interests are not always the same as ours, and some rights would be irrelevant to microbes. For instance, a bacterium doesn't have an interest in voting and, therefore, doesn't have the right to vote because that right would be as meaningless to a bacterium as it is to a child.

"Where do you draw the line?"

The renowned humanitarian Albert Schweitzer, who accomplished so much for both humans and animals in his lifetime, would take time to stoop and move a worm from hot pavement to cool earth. Aware of the problems and responsibilities that an expanded ethic brings, he said, "A man is really ethical only when he obeys the constraint laid on him to aid all life which he is able to help He does not ask how far this or that life deserves sympathy nor how far it is capable of feeling." We can't stop all suffering, but that doesn't mean that we shouldn't stop any. In today's world of virtually unlimited choices, there are plenty of kind, gentle ways for us to feed, educate ourselves, and live well that do not involve killing microbes.

"It's fine for you to believe in microbe rights, but why do you try to tell other people what to do?"

Everybody is entitled to his or her own opinion, but freedom of thought is not the same thing as freedom of action. You

are free to believe whatever you want as long as you don't hurt others. You may believe that microbes should be killed, that black people should be enslaved, or that animals should be eaten, but you don't always have the right to put your beliefs into practice. The very nature of reform movements is to tell others what to do—don't use humans as slaves, don't eat animals, etc.—and all movements initially encounter opposition from people who want to continue to take part in the criticized behavior.

“Microbes don't reason, don't understand rights, and don't always respect our rights, so why should we apply our ideas of morality to them?”

A microbe's inability to understand and adhere to our rules is as irrelevant as a child's or a person with a developmental disability's inability to do so. Microbes are not always able to choose to change their behaviors, but adult human beings have the intelligence and ability to choose between behaviors that hurt others and behaviors that do not hurt others. When given the choice, it makes sense to choose compassion.

“Where does the microbe rights movement stand on abortion?”

There are people on both sides of the abortion issue in the microbe rights movement, just as there are people on both sides of microbe rights issues in the pro-life movement. And just as the pro-life movement has no official position on animal rights, the animal rights movement has no official position on abortion.

“It's almost impossible to avoid killing microbes; if you're still causing microbes suffering without realizing it, what's the point?”

It is impossible to live without causing some harm. Most of us have been vaccinated without consent as children and we've all involuntarily “fought off” an infection or two, but that doesn't mean that we should intentionally cause unnecessary harm. You might accidentally hit someone with your car, but that is no reason to run someone over on purpose.

“What about all the customs, traditions, and jobs that are based on killing microbes?”

The invention of the automobile, the abolition of slavery, and the end of World War II also necessitated restructuring and job retraining. Making changes to customs, traditions, and jobs is part of social progress—not a reason to deter it.

“How can you justify spending your time helping microbes when there are so many people who need help?”

There are very serious problems in the world that deserve our attention, and cruelty to microbes is one of them. We should try to alleviate suffering wherever we can. Helping microbes is not any more or less important than helping human beings—they are both important. Microbe suffering and human suffering are interconnected.

“Wasn’t Hitler in favor of microbe rights?”

Even if this were the case, the merits of an idea cannot be determined by the character of its proponents. If Hitler believed in evolution, would that mean that we should not believe in evolution? What if Gandhi also believed in evolution? How would we reconcile the two? An idea must be judged on its own merits.

“If disinfection and microbe exploitation were wrong, wouldn't they be illegal?”

Legality is no guarantee of morality. Who does and who doesn’t have legal rights is determined merely by the opinions of today’s legislators. The law changes as public opinion or political motivations change, but ethics are not as arbitrary. Child labor, human slavery, and the oppression of women were all legal in the U.S. at one time, but that does not mean that they were ever ethical.

“Have you ever been to a hospital or antibiotics laboratory?”

No, but enough people have filmed and written about what goes on in these places to paint a very detailed picture. You do not need to experience the abuse of microbes close up to be able to criticize it any more than you need to personally experience rape or animal abuse to criticize those. No one will ever be witness to all the suffering in the world, but that doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t try to stop it.