

## 140: Matters of Life and Death – 17 – Animals (1): Utilitarianism & Animal Suffering

### 1 Overview: the threat to common-sense

The basic point at issue is: in virtue of what properties does a being attain **moral standing**?

The common-sense view is that animals matter, but not nearly as much as humans.

I argue that this view is unstable.

- Either we have to accept (with Utilitarianism) that animals matter equally with humans.
- Or we have to accept (with Contractualism) that animals don't matter (directly) at all.

I argue that Contractualism does a better job overall –

- intrinsically more plausible than Utilitarianism
- successfully explaining away the intuitions that seem to support common sense.

*Health warning:* this is an issue on which I have developed (and published) views. While I try to be fair to the opposition, watch out!

### 2 Singer on Speciesism

Singer argues that our failure to take the interests of non-human animal species seriously is discrimination on the basis of *morally-irrelevant characteristics* – e.g. appearance, intelligence, and species membership.

In this respect speciesism is supposed to be just like racism and sexism.

What then *is* a morally-relevant characteristic? What should be enough to guarantee that a creature has full moral standing?

Singer's answer – **the capacity to suffer**.

(This will include, almost certainly, all mammals and birds, but probably no insects, many believe. Fish and reptiles are more difficult.)

This conclusion is entailed by the governing conception of Utilitarianism. Why should a benevolent *impartial* spectator care about appearance, intelligence, or species?

**But** what counts as relevant or irrelevant is relative to your point of view. E.g. is it relevant who wins?

– Yes, I have a bet on the outcome. – No, I just want to see a good game.

What is irrelevant from the standpoint of Utilitarianism may not be so from the standpoint of Contractualism.

Possession of rational agency will certainly be relevant for Contractualists, and so might be appearance and species membership.

So unequal consideration for animals will be speciesist if Utilitarianism is true, but not if Contractualism is.

### 3 Equal moral standing for animals?

Singer argues that we are obliged (if we are Utilitarians) to accord equal moral standing to animals.

We must consider animal interests – particularly their interest in avoiding pain – equally with our own.

This would have wide-ranging consequences, leading us to forbid most hunting, all factory farming, and much experimentation on animals.

Wherever pain is caused to animals, if there is an alternative that would result in less pain / greater utility overall, then we are morally obliged to take it.

Does this mean that we are also obliged to prevent animals from hunting *one another*, where possible?

That will depend upon the costs of intervention. But in principle, yes, we may be so obliged.

Are these consequences acceptable? To what extent do they conflict with pre-theoretical considered common-sense belief?

### **The example of Saul the Sadist.**

Saul keeps a number of animals & humans in conditions of perpetual torture in the dungeons of his castle. You have the opportunity to rescue just one of them.

It would be very wrong of someone to rescue an animal from torture ahead of a human (assuming, e.g., that the human is not a mass-murderer)?

This is so, no matter how long-lived the animal might be (a turtle, an elephant)?

**But** humans will suffer more for equivalent pain (anticipation, humiliation, memory)?

But assume the human is a two-year-old child. This makes no difference? Even *more* wrong to rescue the elephant instead?

What can a Utilitarian say?

That common-sense is *mistaken* on this matter.

The belief that animal suffering has less moral significance is compared to the beliefs of past eras –

- concerning the acceptability of slavery
- concerning the inferior moral status of women and members of other races.

Moral progress is a continual battle against our own natural partiality. The animals issue is but the last stage in the attempt to widen the boundaries of moral concern.

This would be fine if Utilitarianism were the only game in town. But attaining reflective equilibrium is an *inter*-theoretic as well as an *intra*-theoretic matter. We need to compare with Contractualism.

Also, there never was a defensible moral theory that could justify slavery or the differential treatment of women and members of other races.

These practices were based upon false beliefs about relative cognitive powers, and collapsed when those beliefs did.

But there *is* a defensible moral theory that would justify differential treatment of animals, namely Contractualism (see #19 & #20).

⇒ Singer has no theory-independent argument *for* equal consideration for animals.

Whether the resulting changes to common-sense are acceptable depends upon –

- (a) whether Utilitarianism as a whole is acceptable
- (b) whether there is an equally acceptable theory that *wouldn't* entail those changes.

### **4 Causing suffering is wrong but killing is OK?**

Singer tries to make his position more acceptable to common sense by arguing that, although it is wrong to cause suffering to animals, it is alright to kill them.

(Regan, too, [*The Case for Animal Rights*] argues that animal lives have less moral significance than human lives.)

So moral vegetarianism isn't entailed, provided that the farming and slaughtering practices involved aren't cruel.

Is such a position coherent? Arguably not – see #18.

And *if* not, then we have another set of counter-examples.

### **The example of Kenneth the kennel-owner.**

A fire in a dogs' home. The owner, Kenneth, is unconscious on the floor. The dogs are all locked in their cages. There is time only to drag Kenneth to safety, or to unlock the cages, but not both.

Very wrong to save the lives of even many dogs over the life of a single human? (Kenneth is in his 60s, single, with no close friends. This makes no difference?)

⇒ If Utilitarianism is true, we have to accept a major revision in common-sense moral belief.