

## 140: Matters of Life and Death – 18 – Animals (2): Utilitarianism & Animal Lives

### 1 Preliminaries

Three (bad) Utilitarian arguments for claiming that, although animals have equal moral standing, their lives don't have (so much) moral significance. (Many Utilitarians *say* that animal lives don't matter so much; but I claim that Utilitarian principles really commit them to the opposite.)

So lives, too, must be counted equally, for a Utilitarian. A problem for Reflective Equilibrium? Can we bring ourselves to believe this? Can we believe that killing an animal is murder?

Not if there is another moral theory (Contractualism) which is less revisionary of ordinary belief and/or is more theoretically satisfactory overall.

### 2 The Desire for Continued Life

Singer argues from the standpoint of Preference Utilitarianism – animals, unlike most humans, lack any desire or preference for their own continued life, as such; this is because they lack the capacity to conceive of their own non-existence. For this reason it is supposed not to be wrong to kill an animal. (Compare Tooley on infanticide and the right to life in #22.)

**But** as we saw in #6, the reason why death is a harm is because it cuts off future worth-while existence, not because it objectively frustrates the desire for continued life. Even if they don't have any desire for continued life, animals have lots of other desires whose satisfaction would have (or could have) led them to have a worthwhile existence had they *not* been killed.

**So** – there is essentially the same sort of moral objection to killing animals as to killing humans from the standpoint of Utilitarianism.

**And** – killing an animal will be as bad as killing a human, other things being equal.

**Note** that *if* we had agreed with Nagel that objective frustrations of desire constitute a basic form of harm, then we could say that death is more harmful for humans than for animals.

This is because humans have many more plans and projects whose objective fulfillment requires their own continued existence.

Most animals just have desires moment-to-moment. The current desire will be objectively frustrated by death.

Note: from a Contractualist standpoint there will be an argument against killing humans that doesn't extend to animals – namely that, by frustrating the desire for continued life, killing infringes autonomy.

⇒ The first argument fails. Since what is bad about death is prevention of continued worthwhile life, death is bad for animals in the same way as for humans.

⇒ For a Utilitarian, killing animals is wrong in the same way as killing humans.

### 3 Higher versus Lower Modes of Life

Singer also argues (as does Regan) that killing animals will be less morally serious than killing humans, because animal lives have less moral value than human lives.

This is an attempt to revitalize the Utilitarian distinction between *higher and lower pleasures*. Are some satisfactions *worth* more than others (of otherwise equal intensity)? Mill thought so – “better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a pig satisfied.”

Broadly intellectual pleasures are worth more, he thought, than mere animal ones. But what is the criterion of height?

**Note** it is *not* a claim about intrinsic (objective) value. This would be unacceptable Intuitionism.

**Note** that sometimes Mill gets the higher/lower distinction mixed up with the fact that some pleasures or modes of life are more *productive* than others (learning, reading, etc.).

But this shouldn't lead to greater weighting – the further consequences will see to that.

**Mill's criterion** of a pleasure being higher, is that those who have experienced both would prefer it. This is just covert Preference Utilitarianism? Mill is giving due weight to people's second-order preference for one pleasure over another?

Is it plausible to rank my desire higher than yours if you, too, *would* rank it higher with further experience?  
 Perhaps so, in simple cases where lack of knowledge is the only obstacle. But the criterion will be useless where appreciating a new range of pleasures would require a *change of character*.  
 (Philosophy; higher maths?)

**Singer's e.g.** – the creature that lives the life, first of a horse (with the cognitive powers and pleasures of a horse), and then of a human (with the cognitive powers and pleasures of a human), and then in some third mode different from both, in which it has full memory of both. It would prefer the life of a human?

**But** the example is biased. If in the third mode it has articulate memories of the previous two, and can reason about which was preferable, then its cognitive powers in that mode would be much more similar to us than to the horse. No wonder it would think a horsy life uninteresting!

Although (arguably) not accessible to a Utilitarian, the higher/lower distinction nevertheless has powerful intuitive appeal. Some of the appeal of a higher/lower distinction can be explained by Contractualism.

**E.g. the electrode workers**, wired up to have the pleasure-center of their brain stimulated every time they make a movement in a repetitive job. They work 18 hours a day and have no other interests! They are blissfully happy, but lead a life that is *impoverished*?

And it would be wrong to choose such a life for your child (if the operation has to be done before adolescence, say)?

The example is not explained by the traditional Utilitarian criterion, since the situation of the two groups is symmetrical – once released from being an electrode worker and back into normal life you would prefer that; when wired up you would prefer that.

Explanation – the electrode workers are prevented from exercising genuine agency; autonomous agency is accorded a central role within Contractualism. Contracting agents should agree that it is wrong to do things to people which effectively prevents the exercise of rational agency, even if doing so ensures happiness (lobotomy, drug dependency, becoming an electrode worker, etc.)

⇒ The Utilitarians' second argument for saying that killing animals is less serious than killing humans also fails.

#### 4 **Life as a Journey** (P.Singer 'Life's Uncertain Voyage' in P.Pettit *et al.*, eds., *Metaphysics and Morality*.)

Human beings have long-term plans and expectations that give their lives *shape*, Singer argues.

The shape is that of a journey – preparation, traveling, achievement, completion. It is less serious to die before embarking at all (as a baby) or when the journey is completed (when old). And for those who do not 'travel' at all (namely, animals) death is also not serious.

But why is it only *long-term* plans and projects that make death bad? Surely for a Utilitarian what makes death bad is the non-satisfaction of *any* desire or project, whether long- or short-term.

(Again, if we had agreed with Nagel that the harm of death lies in the *objective* frustration of desires, then Singer would have an argument here. For an animal has few desires to be frustrated.)

Granted, a Contractualist might think the death of a baby less of a tragedy (for the baby), since there is as yet no rational agent whose life-plans are cut short. But this isn't a Utilitarian intuition. And the death of the old is only less bad because they themselves *sometimes think it* less bad, or because it isn't true that they *would* have continued to lead a worthwhile existence if they hadn't died.

⇒ Singer's third argument also fails.

#### 5 **Conclusion of 17 & 18**

From a Utilitarian perspective we are required to give equal consideration to animal suffering *and* we are required to think that killing animals is as bad as killing humans (other things being equal). These consequences will be hard to swallow for many people. Whether we *have* to swallow them will depend on the results of an *inter-theoretic* comparison with a Contractualist approach (see #19 and #20).