

## Animal Liberation

### I. Questions

- What makes a life good? What features in a life contribute to its goodness? How should we understand human well-being or human welfare?
- Are there things that are good or valuable other than human lives?
  - Are there things that are good or valuable that are not sentient? What makes them good?
  - Is the sentience in other beings as good or valuable as the sentience in humans?

### II. Equal consideration

Pain, suffering, and death, are generally agreed to be bad things. From a moral point of view it seems that the badness of pain doesn't depend on *who* feels it; its badness resides simply in *what* it feels like. As Peter Singer says, "How bad a pain is depends on how intense it is and how long it lasts...pains of the same intensity and duration are equally bad..." (626). Although it is morally permissible—perhaps even morally required—for me to respond to my daughter's pain differently from a stranger's pain, in cases where I don't have such special duties it seems that I should be impartial and respond simply to the badness of the situation.

Claims of equality are not descriptive claims about equal talents, abilities, and the like. Rather, they are claims about moral worth and respect. It is clear that the Declaration of Independence is not asserting that "all men are created [with] equal [intelligence...etc.]," for that would be clearly false. Instead it is claiming that the well-being of each person is of equal value. (623) Happiness is happiness, pain is pain, regardless of whose it is.

The idea that each person's welfare is of equal value, does not entail, however, that we must be treated the same way. Valuing their welfare equally will require recognizing their differences and providing differential treatment. A system of "*formal equality*" is one that guarantees equal treatment. A system of "*substantive equality*" aims to demonstrate equal respect for everyone's welfare. In order to achieve substantive equality, something must be done to address different needs even though it involves different treatment. Example: access to the break room.

### III. Animal suffering

With these points in place, we can now turn to Singer's argument supporting the equality of animals.

1. The capacity to suffer (experience pleasure and pain) is the basis for equal consideration in a moral community. (624)
2. Someone is granted equal consideration just in case their welfare counts equally to others regardless of "what they are like or what abilities they may possess", though what form our consideration should take may "vary according to the characteristics of those affected". (623)
3. Non-human animals have the capacity to suffer. (625)
4. Therefore, the welfare of non-human animals should count equally to the welfare of humans.
5. Therefore, we should make as much effort to avoid causing pain and suffering to non-human animals as we do to avoid causing pain and suffering to humans, taking into account the different ways that sentient beings can suffer.
6. Therefore, we should "make radical changes in our treatment of animals that would involve our diet, the farming methods we use, experimental procedures in many fields of science, our approach to wildlife and to hunting, trapping and the wearing of furs, and areas of entertainment like circuses, rodeos, and zoos." (626)

### Objections:

- It is difficult to compare the suffering of non-human animals and the suffering of humans, since we can't talk to non-human animals. Might it be that the happiness brought about by wearing a fur coat outweighs the suffering of the animals that were killed to make it?
- We have special duties to members of our species that we don't have toward members of other species.
- It isn't the capacity to suffer that entitles one equal consideration, but other higher-level capacities that food-animals and experimental animals don't have.

### **IV. Animal killing**

Singer acknowledges that the question of killing animals is more complicated. Human lives are very different from non-human lives. Humans are capable of self-awareness, planning, complex social relationships, and the like, that make for goods over the span of a life that are not available to non-human animals. To kill a human is to put an end to distinctively human goods. So killing a human is worse than killing an animal, and if there is pressure to choose between killing a human and killing a non-human animal, it would usually be permissible to kill the animal.

Acknowledging this, however, Singer maintains:

To avoid speciesism we must allow that beings who are similar in all relevant respects have a similar right to life—and mere membership in our own biological species cannot be a morally relevant criterion for this right. (626-27)

So Singer is willing to hold that killing animals should be treated as comparable to killing babies with serious birth defects or killing “someone in a state of advanced senility”. (627) Whether or not that is ever justified is a question he chooses not to answer here.

In other words, Singer thinks that his approach to animal rights helps us understand that the moral boundary we should respect is not the boundary between humans and non-humans, but between beings with certain capacities and others without them. Some humans lack the full spectrum of normal human capacities; some non-human animals have capacities that significantly overlap ours. The capacity to suffer is one that unites us with non-humans in a moral community; complex intellectual and emotional capacities divide humans into smaller sub-groups. As Singer sees it, these broader and narrower groupings are the morally relevant ones. Instead most of us are making the serious error of treating the boundaries of our species as the boundaries of our moral community.

### Questions:

- Is it permissible to kill plants? Must we all become vegetarians?
- Isn't it natural for animals to kill and eat animals of other species? If so, then why shouldn't we do the same?
- Isn't there something especially valuable about all humans, even if in particular cases they can't manifest the full range of human capacities?

### **V. Steinbock's Objection**

“Certain capacities, which seem to be unique to human beings, entitle their possessors to a privileged position in the moral community.” (632) These capacities include: responsibility for action, moral autonomy, capacity to reciprocate, ability to be motivated by altruism and moral concern, and a desire for self-respect. It is true that we would not tolerate a hierarchical society based on a degree of intelligence or cognitive capacity. But a minimal level of intelligence can be used as a “cut-off point” for moral consideration. This does not entail that we must treat humans with limited capacities with less respect and consideration, because we have special duties towards them that we don't have towards non-human animals.