

Our treatment of non-human animals

UTILITARIANISM

Peter Singer argues that the way we commonly treat animals – for food, clothing, and medical experimentation – is not morally justifiable (*Animal Liberation*). We do not think that it is right to treat women worse than men just because they are women (this is sexism), nor to treat one race worse than another (this is racism). Likewise, it is wrong to treat animals differently just because they are not human. This is ‘speciesism’.

We can object that with women and men, and different races, there is no difference in those important capacities – reason, the use of language, the depth of our emotional experience, our self-awareness, our ability to distinguish right and wrong – that make a being a person. But there is a difference between human beings and animals with all of these.

Singer responds that these differences are not relevant when it comes to the important capacity that human beings and animals share, viz. sentience. For a utilitarian, an act (or rule) is wrong if it produces more suffering than an alternative. Who is suffering is irrelevant. When it comes to suffering, animals should be treated as equal to people.

Does this mean that we should prohibit eating meat, wearing leather, and animal experiments? Not necessarily. First, there is the question of whether stopping these practices would reduce the amount of (animal) suffering in the world more than it would increase (human) suffering. Second, the utilitarian position only objects to suffering, not to killing. If you painlessly kill an animal and bring another animal into being (as is done when rearing animals), you haven’t reduced the total amount of happiness in the world. We need only ensure that animals are happy when they are alive and slaughtering them painlessly. This would make eating meat much more expensive, because animals would have to be kept in much better conditions. Eating meat is only wrong when animals are not treated as well as they could be.

DEONTOLOGY

Deontologists argue that killing human beings is wrong because they have a right to life. Having rights is related to our rationality and choices – they protect the ‘space’ which we need in order to make free, rational choices. Animals don’t make choices the way we do, so they don’t have rights.

But babies also aren’t rational and don’t make free choices (yet) and some people with severe mental disabilities never do. If they have a right to life, and do not have different psychological capacities from certain animals, then to deny those animals a right to life would be speciesist. With any property that only human beings that justify a right to life, some human beings won’t have it. With any property that all human beings have, some animals have it as well.

Tom Regan argues that to have a right to life, a creature only needs to be a ‘subject of a life’ (*The Case for Animal Rights*). By this he means have beliefs, desires, emotions,

perception, memory, the ability to act (though not necessarily free choice), and a psychological identity over time. If a creature has these abilities, there is a way its life goes for it, and this matters to it. A right to life protects this. Although we can't know exactly which animals meet this criterion, we can be sure that almost all mammals (including humans) over the age of one do so.

Because these animals have a right to life, Regan argues, we cannot kill them for any reason less important than saving life. Because we do not need to eat meat or wear leather to live, we should not use animals for these purposes. Regan also argues that an animal's right to life is equal to a human being's. We do not normally discriminate between 'more valuable' and 'less valuable' human lives, even though some people are capable of much greater things than others. So we should not discriminate between 'more valuable' human lives and 'less valuable' animal lives. This means we cannot justify medical experiments that involve killing animals by the human lives the experiment may help save.

Regan's view is very counter-intuitive. Our intuitive judgments that the lives of human beings are more valuable than those of animals, and that it is permissible to kill an animal when we need to, are very strong. But what are the arguments supporting these intuitions?

PRACTICAL WISDOM

Is the speciesism argument valid? Perhaps it is not just the capacities of the being that determine how we should treat it, but also our relationship to it. There is a moral importance to bonding, the creation of special ties with particular others. We 'naturally' privilege those closest to us. Our bond to other human beings is special because we share humanity.

Of course, not to recognise that an animal can suffer is to show a lack of compassion. To treat it as a meat-growing machine or experimental object is to display a relationship with it that resembles selfishness, because we reduce it from what it is in itself to something that exists only for our sake. Does this mean that eating meat and animal experiments are wrong? We are left without a clear answer, but a sense of the difficulty of the question.