



Philosophy and the Human Situation

Ethics, Animals, and the Environment

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There are many quite specific moral questions people often ask about animals – by which I mean non-human animals – and about the environment. Is the debeaking of chickens in intensive farming morally wrong, for example? Or does it matter that the building of this particular road is likely to result in the extinction of a certain species of plant in the North of Wales? In philosophy, however, we must try to get behind these specific questions, since answering them requires answers to some more general and prior questions.

The first question is whether animals and the environment matter morally at all. Nearly all of us think that certain items in the world don't matter morally: the sweet wrapper I have just thrown in my bin, for instance. I can for my own amusement stamp hard on that wrapper, burn it, or tear it into pieces, and no one is likely to object. It has no moral status. But nearly everyone would object very strongly if I tried to do the same things to a child! So some things clearly do matter morally, while others clearly don't. Animals and the environment fall into the grey area in between, which is why philosophers are so exercised about their moral status. Perhaps we should go even further back, and begin by asking about the nature of morality itself. According to one very common view, which is at least two and a half thousand years old, morality is a kind of contract. Modern contractualism comes in two forms. In the form influenced by the seventeenth century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes, morality is an agreement between people, in their own interest, to refrain from harming one another. Imagine that there was no rule against killing other people in our society. On various plausible assumptions, that would make life much worse for nearly everyone. So it makes a lot of sense for us to agree to abide by certain rules, such as the rule forbidding killing.

Another form of contractualism, influenced by the German philosopher of the eighteenth century, Immanuel Kant, sees morality in less self-interested terms. Morality is the institution in which rational beings can demonstrate their impartial respect for other rational beings and their dignity. Rationally, I must accept that you have a rational point of view on the world much as I do, and since what is rationally acceptable must be acceptable from all points of view (two plus two is always four, wherever and whoever you are), I can do to you only what you could rationally agree to.

Both forms of contractualism run into serious problems with animals. Imagine I am kicking a small dog, hard. Neither form of contractualism can easily condemn what I am doing, since humans can't engage in any contract with dogs: they cannot reciprocate, so we would gain nothing by allowing them beneath the moral umbrella; and they are not rational, so there is no way in which I can seek to do to them only what they could rationally consent to.

Contractualists often make some fancy moves at this point. The Hobbesian ones, for example, might suggest that, since people who are kinder to animals are kinder to people too, it would be better for all of us if we signed up to rules which covered animals. And a Kantian could try a similar strategy, as indeed Kant himself did, by arguing that rational beings will recognize this fact about human character and hence will to be people who are kind to animals.

But ultimately these moves are unsatisfactory, since they fail to address what most people feel very strongly about my abuse of that small dog: it's wrong in itself, regardless of any link my action may have with human interests. It's tempting, then, to extend the moral umbrella so that it covers animals.

But which animals? Chimpanzees and the other higher primates, sure. But what about very basic creatures, such as lowly forms of insect life? What many people think matters here is sentience, by which they mean the capacity to feel pleasure and pain, or the capacity to care about what happens to oneself. If an insect has no mental states, or rather no mental states which involve pleasure and pain or concern for itself, then, from the moral point of view, on the view we are considering, it doesn't matter. Moral status then comes with sentience. Let's call this the sentience view. Where sentience begins, of course, is a very tricky question; but it is largely for psychology, so we can put it to one side for the moment.

One popular view about the moral status of animals is called utilitarianism, according to which – in its classical form – we are morally required to bring about the greatest balance of pleasure over pain. Its most famous proponent was the eighteenth century English philosopher Jeremy Bentham. In a famous passage, he said of animals:

'The day may come when the rest of the animal creation may acquire those rights which never could have been withholden from them but by the hand of tyranny'.

Bentham goes on to wonder what it is that might decide the moral status of animals, and concludes:

'The question is not, Can they reason? Nor, Can they talk? But, Can they suffer?'

Now I'll come back to utilitarianism shortly, but for the moment it's important to notice that the sentience view, though it is of course consistent with the utilitarian view, is not equivalent to it. In other words, you can believe that the only things that matter are sentient beings, but not be a utilitarian.

This is in fact the position of those who believe in what have come to be called 'animal rights'. Talk of rights has burgeoned in our culture in the last fifty years. Not only do people demand the right to roam in the countryside, or the right to abortion on demand, and a thousand other things, but moral rights are commonly extended to animals as well. We can understand a rights theory as intrinsically opposed to utilitarianism, in something like the following way. Imagine a mad scientist has three cats, Tiddles, Toddles and Felix, in his lab. He calls you in to take a look, and says that he is about to inflict a pretty nasty shock on both Tiddles and Toddles. He enjoys seeing others inflict pain, however, so if you will agree to inflict a slightly more severe shock on Felix, Tiddles and Toddles will escape shock-free. Now, because this is philosophy, we can imagine away all the real-life opportunities there would be for contacting the police, the RSPCA and so on. You really do have to make this choice, and the utilitarian answer is clear: you should torture Felix, so as to minimize overall pain. Even though the individual pains of Tiddles and Toddles will be slightly lower than that of Felix, we have to remember there are two of them, and suffering can be added up according to utilitarianism. But many will say that doing this is wrong, because animals have rights not to be tortured – and these rights protect them, morally, even if violating the right in question would do more good overall.

Should we accept the animal rights view? I think not, because we can do without the notion of rights in developing our view of morality. Rights don't really help; they merely create lots of new questions: Who has rights? How strong are the rights? What are they to? What happens when they conflict? When we say that so-and-so has a right to x, we are really saying nothing more than that they should have x. And x is nearly always something good, or worth having. If we say Felix has the right not to be tortured, we're saying that he should have freedom from pain. If we say that someone has a right to food, we're saying that they should be given food. And when we can't distribute everything good, or avoid everything bad, that we might want, then we have to make a judgement about what to do. And rights theory can't help but get in the way of making such decisions. It's better just to take the good and bad things at stake, consider their importance, and then make as informed a decision as is possible in the circumstances.

So, if there are no animal rights, should we after all follow Bentham, and go for the utilitarian position on how to treat animals? I think not, because there is a special principle of justice which emerges as compassion and which utilitarianism cannot make room for. To see this, consider an example involving only human beings. Imagine that, as an officer for your local council, you can choose where to build a new library. Various cost-benefit calculations are done, and it seems that building the library in a very rich area would produce slightly more good overall than building it in a poor area (the rich, we can assume for the sake of the example, are better educated, have more leisure time, and so on). Now assume also, for the sake of argument, that the rich have all inherited their wealth, and that the poor are poor through no fault of their own. It is tempting to think there is here at least a case to be made for building the library in the poor area, even though this will not produce the most overall good. Indeed there seems something unfair in the utilitarian idea that we should never give any kind of priority to those who are worse off through no fault of their own. What do I mean by 'worse off'? Simply that the lives of the poor we're assuming in this example go less well for them than the lives of the rich go for them.

Now, what about animals? There's a story that the Cambridge philosopher of earlier this century, McTaggart, used to have a fire in his study, and that his cat used to occupy the comfortable seat in front of the fire while McTaggart shivered on his sofa. When asked why he

allowed the cat to do this, McTaggart said he felt sorry for the cat: it was only a cat, after all, and therefore many of the pleasures and experiences that make our human lives so valuable were quite unavailable to it. So the least he could do was let it sit by the fire.

I think McTaggart was right. Even the higher primates – chimpanzees and so on – will have lives of far less complexity and richness than most human lives, and for this reason they deserve our pity. As we go down the scale, the demand for compassion and pity grows yet stronger. Compared to a chimpanzee, for example, the lot of a mouse really is pitiable. So, in other words, though there is a lot to be said for the utilitarian idea that we should seek to produce the greatest balance of pleasure over pain, the theory must be supplemented by a principle that requires us to show special compassion for those beings whose lives are worse than ours, through no fault of those beings themselves.

So, can we now return to the class of more specific moral questions about animals I mentioned at the beginning of this talk, and use our principles of benevolence and compassion to decide? Well, it's not that simple. Because we have at least two principles now in play (and there may be others), our theory itself will underdetermine what we should do when benevolence – that is, producing the most good – is inconsistent with compassion – that is, giving priority to the worse off. But this does not mean that our decisions have to be arbitrary. There is a need for sensitive judgement about what to do in particular cases. Interestingly, this kind of judgement is also implied in single-principled theories, such as utilitarianism, though this is often not noticed.

Utilitarianism, as a theory, does not itself give us a theory to justify our accepting it. For that, we have to examine the theory, and use our judgement – and utilitarians, of course, will say that we should accept the theory once we have assessed the case for and the case against. One option in moral philosophy which makes explicit room for this kind of judgement is virtue ethics. According to this view, we should do what the virtuous person would do in our situation. There is a real difficulty in applying this theory, since if you know what the virtuous person would do then you are more than half-way there! But it does provide us with the resources to debate the issues, with ourselves and with one another. What, then, would a virtuous person, with benevolence and compassion, say about our contemporary treatment of animals?

I think she would say it is appalling. Comparisons are often made between the way we treat animals, and the way that the interests of slaves were ignored by slave-owners in previous centuries. These comparisons are, in many ways, apt. It's in our interest to think that animals matter less than they do: avoiding factory-farmed meat is expensive, complaining to the European Union about the export of live animals takes time, and actively campaigning against pointless animal experimentation requires a lot of effort. But my suggestion is that both benevolence and compassion, in most cases, speak in favour of a serious modification of the way we treat animals in our society, and that in future people will come to think of our blindness to animal welfare as similar to previous generations' attitudes towards slaves. Particularly horrible, I think, since it is on such a massive scale, is the world-wide intensive rearing of animals for food, in the cruellest conditions. Take chickens, for example. Get a page of a broadsheet newspaper, and lay it on your table. Now imagine five chickens, each weighing about four pounds, living in that area, caged, for a year. Very roughly, there's a battery hen incarcerated in these conditions for each person in the United Kingdom who eats intensively reared eggs. Free range eggs do not cost much more than battery eggs, and even if they did, this could not justify inflicting such suffering on sentient beings. Though it does not feel like this to the consumer in the supermarket, it's malicious and cruel to buy these products.

Let's now move the focus back again, towards the more abstract questions of moral status. In recent years, several people in the environmental movement have begun to question the sentience view, in relation to the value of the environment and to the moral assessment of the damage caused to it by human action. Two views have emerged. One, based on the sentience view, has been called 'shallow ecology'.

According to this position, the environment has no value in itself. Rather, it's useful only in so far as it provides various advantages for sentient beings, in particular human beings. Consider some imaginary valley. This valley contains many beautiful and interesting rock formations, and a flourishing ecosystem, involving an astonishing range of flora and fauna. Now it's proposed to flood the valley as part of a hydroelectricity project. There will, we may assume, be benefits for the consumers of the electricity. But there will be losses to those who enjoy visiting the valley, and to the sentient beings – the animals – that inhabit it. According to

shallow ecology, these are the only things that matter. The costs and benefits are to be weighed up, and a decision made on the basis of reflective judgement (and, remember, this needn't be a utilitarian decision – it could be argued that even if the overall balance of pleasure over pain would be increased by flooding the valley, this shouldn't be done, because, for example, the interests of the animals should be given special weight in our calculations).

Deep ecology, however, goes beyond this. The deep ecologist might well agree that the various costs and benefits noted by the shallow ecologist are important, but will claim that the valley has moral weight in itself. This view sounds, to many people, rather peculiar. At the beginning of this talk, I confidently asserted that no one would think my discarded sweet wrapper had any moral status. But isn't deep ecology rather close to this crazy view? How can a valley – a non-sentient being – matter morally?

Deep ecology, however, does rest on a response that many of us feel to environmental degradation. Seeing some wonderful part of the earth's surface despoiled and polluted for the sake of gain can be a deeply depressing and dispiriting experience. And, if we are honest with ourselves, when we have these feelings, they are not based solely on concerns for sentient beings. There just seems something terrible about destroying things which have been there for so long, and are the product of such awesome forces. To bring this out, consider the so-called 'Last Person' argument. Some catastrophe – a disease, perhaps – has brought sentient life almost to an end. Only one person survives, and he is about to leave the Okavango delta, in Africa, to head inland. He has the opportunity to destroy the delta for ever, with some great bomb. Ask yourself whether you think he is doing anything wrong if he decides to let that bomb off. If you do, then you are probably a deep ecologist.

Last Person arguments and our responses to environmental degradation are not the only supports for deep ecology. In a way, the sentience view, properly articulated, contains some support for its own abandonment in favour of deep ecology. According to the sentience view, when we think about human beings, what matters is our own welfare, or well-being. Many people think that our well-being is closely tied up with what we achieve in our lives. Consider the life of Michelangelo. What seems so good about his life is the beauty of what he created. And this beauty is not to be explained solely in terms of the experiences it makes possible for viewers of the Sistine Chapel. For those experiences themselves are best understood, from the inside, as responses to external value, to beauty. So if there can be aesthetic values in the products of artists which are independent of sentience in this way, why can't there be such value in the environment itself?

Environmental ethics – that area of moral philosophy especially concerned with environmental issues – is a major growth industry these days. It has its own societies, journals, experts, its special courses and qualifications and it's dominated by the debate between shallow and deep ecology. This is ironic. Presumably, people have become interested in environmental ethics because of the moral significance of human destruction of the planet. But whether shallow or deep ecology is right doesn't matter a great deal. This is for two reasons. First, both views are likely to come to similar conclusions – that we ought, individually and collectively, to be limiting drastically our consumption of fossil fuels, for example. Secondly, even if the environment does have some moral weight in itself, it doesn't have very much. Let me return again to our imaginary virtuous person. I can't think she would accept, in some real-life case, the infliction of even a moderate amount of suffering on some innocent being for the sake of preserving some degree of deep environmental value, independent of the interests of sentient beings. Imagine a Last Person example in which the choice is between blowing up the Okavango and saving some sentient being from a period of severe agony on the one hand, and leaving the delta in all its glory for no one ever to see again on the other. Neither benevolence nor compassion will allow giving such weight to what are essentially aesthetic values that they can override the important welfare interests of sentient beings. The sentience view, and a virtue ethics which includes both benevolence and compassion, may not be quite the whole story about our moral relationship with animals and the environment. But once that story is told, there is very little left to worry about.