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Moral Agency

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Moral Agency

People tend to place humans at the top of the animal hierarchy based on criteria like consciousness, autonomy, and intelligence. Peter Singer, on the other hand, maintains that those capacities are not morally relevant and that people do not possess any unique characteristic that entitles all and only humans to direct and equal moral consideration.¹ He uses two arguments to back the claim that not all humans deserve direct and equal consideration: the argument from marginal cases and the sophisticated inegalitarian argument. However, the capacity for moral agency should grant all human beings an equal and higher moral status than other non-human animals.

Most people believe that there is a fundamental moral difference between human beings and animals. Although animals are worthy of our concern, they do not merit the kind of concern that human beings do. Singer classifies this thinking as speciesism. Speciesism means being prejudiced or having an attitude of bias in favor of the interests of members of one's own species and against those of members of other species.² Singer declares that most people engage in speciesism, and they believe that the practice is justified.

An argument against speciesism, advanced by Singer, rests on the principle of equal consideration of interests. This principle claims that one should give equal weight in one's moral decision-making to the like interests of all those affected by one's actions.³ Singer contends that the capacity of suffering/pain and enjoyment is the only morally relevant property for equal consideration.⁴ Equal consideration does not mean identical treatment but means we should weigh the comparable interests of all creatures, who can suffer, that will be affected by our actions. We have to compare our suffering to the suffering of other animals. If one accepts the principle of equal consideration, then the interests of non-human animals will sometimes be

¹ Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation: the Definitive Classic of the Animal Movement* (Old Saybrook, CT: Tantor Media, Inc., 2015), 31.

² Singer, *Animal Liberation: the Definitive Classic of the Animal Movement*, 35.

³ Singer, *Animal Liberation: the Definitive Classic of the Animal Movement*, 36.

⁴ Singer, *Animal Liberation: the Definitive Classic of the Animal Movement*, 36.

greater than the interests of human beings. For example, humans should not eat meat because the suffering that animals experience from factory farms outweighs the pain we feel from not eating meat. He uses two arguments to support his principle of equal consideration of interests: the argument from marginal cases and the sophisticated inegalitarian argument.

While Singer's equal consideration of interests is highly convincing, it fails to see the significance of the capacity for moral agency. Moral agency/autonomy involves having the ability to act freely, reflectively, and purposefully based on moral principles.⁵ Someone that possesses moral agency is called a moral agent. A moral agent is an individual who can act morally, and hence who is responsible for his or her actions.⁶ Also, moral agents can have responsibilities towards moral patients. Moral patients are individuals who matter morally and have moral standing but who may not be held morally responsible for their actions, like cats and dogs.⁷ On this definition, all moral agents are also moral patients, but moral patients need not be moral agents.

Moreover, the capacity for moral agency requires two additional capacities: rationality and empathy. Rationality means the ability to engage in means-end reasoning or logical thought.⁸ Since morality is based on principles, one must use deductive reasoning to interpret these rules to find the correct answer. For instance, a person comes across an injured human, and he can either (A) help the person or (B) walk away. He uses reason to decide that option B cannot be the solution because it violates the intrinsic worth of that human being. Therefore, he concludes that he has a duty towards option A. In short, rationality helps us make moral judgments.

⁵ Brian Duignan, "Speciesism," Encyclopædia Britannica (Encyclopædia Britannica, inc.)

⁶ Kristin Andrews, *Animal Mind: an Introduction to the Philosophy of Animal Cognition*, Second (ROUTLEDGE, 2020), 265.

⁷ Andrews, *Animal Mind: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Animal Cognition*, 265.

⁸ Andrews, *Animal Mind: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Animal Cognition*, 110.

Empathy is also required for moral agency and defined as taking the perspective of another to understand what that other is experiencing.⁹ While rationality is necessary for making moral choices, empathy is necessary for motivating moral conduct. So, when I stumble upon an injured person, my empathy causes me to care for another's well-being. I imagine being a wounded person that is all alone, and consequently, it forces me to assist the injured human. Empathy turns our moral judgments into moral conduct.

Historically, on the subject of morality, rationality and emotion have been in direct conflict. Kant argued that reason, rather than feeling or emotion, is the highest authority in the moral domain.¹⁰ Conversely, Hume famously claimed that "Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them."¹¹ According to Hume, reason might have a role in human action, but it is subordinate to passion.

However, I believe rationality and emotion play a significant part in morality. Emotions—specifically empathy—are an essential part of morality because it leads towards moral conduct. Morality cannot solely consist of rationality because a cold follower of social norms who feels emotionally unmoved by their actions strikes many as a kind of monster despite their good actions.¹² A robot programmed to be good would not make a moral agent. The robot need not know why it should not injure a human, it need not feel any emotions or outrage when it sees a human being injured, and it need not feel empathy when seeing a living being in pain to exhibit its encoded moral behavior.¹³ Emotions act as an impetus so individuals can respond to the demands of morality.

Morality has to have some component of reason as well. Acting solely on empathy does not mean you know the difference between right and wrong. An example of this is a parent

⁹ Andrews, *Animal Mind: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Animal Cognition*, 245.

¹⁰ Eric Entrican Wilson and Lara Denis, "Kant and Hume on Morality," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

¹¹ Eric Entrican Wilson and Lara Denis, "Kant and Hume on Morality," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

¹² Andrews, *Animal Mind: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Animal Cognition*, 245.

¹³ Andrews, *Animal Mind: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Animal Cognition*, 240.

spoiling his child. The father reacts based on his emotions and gives the child what he or she wants. Even though the dad cares deeply about his son or daughter, that does not mean spoiling the child is the morally right action. Therefore, emotions cannot be the only basis for morality. People help others out of empathy and may still end up doing the morally correct thing, but that does not mean they have a notion of right and wrong. That conception of right and wrong comes through reason. Depending on the situation, one capacity may play a more significant role than the other, but they influence our moral thinking. This explanation illustrates that morality is grounded in both emotion and reason.

Additionally, only human beings can act morally and become moral agents. Other animals do not possess the capacity for rationality or the capacity for empathy. Rationality requires deductive reasoning, so someone can interpret the moral principles to figure out the correct answer. However, there is no evidence that non-human animals engage in deductive reasoning. Some experiments or anecdotal evidence might try to show that other animals use deductive reasoning to solve problems. But researchers cannot demonstrate that the animal did not use some other ability to figure out the solution.

Consider the story of Chrysippus and his dog Artemis.¹⁴ Artemis chased a rabbit through a field, but the rabbit disappeared down a path. When Artemis got to the point where the rabbit disappeared, she saw that there were only three ways the rabbit could have gone. Artemis puts her nose to the ground, sniffs the first path and then the second path, then lifts her nose and rushes down the third. This story supposedly illustrates a dog using deductive reasoning to track down the rabbit. While Artemis appeared to engage in logical inference, she may have used some other means to reach her conclusion. Given the uncertainty in these stories and experiments, we can not state that other animals have the capacity for rationality.

Also, empathy—taking the perspective of another to understand what that other is experiencing—does not exist in other animals. To take the viewpoint of another, one must have

¹⁴ Andrews, *Animal Mind: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Animal Cognition*, 107.

a grammatical language to represent those thoughts. If my mom starts to cry, I must have the belief that my mom is crying. Then, I need to think about that thought (metarepresentation) and try to see it from my mom's position. Metarepresentation requires conscious thinking, which is speaking silently in your head. To consciously think in your head, you must have language.

However, there is no evidence that non-human animals possess grammatical language. Communication between animals does not contain any grammar or syntax. Attempts by scientists to teach sign language to primates have also failed. In the movie *Project Nim*, Herbert Terrace, a professor of psychology and psychiatry at Columbia University, tried to see if a chimpanzee could learn sign language. After the study, Terrace concluded that the chimpanzee could not use grammar and could only memorize words. Other primates showed similar results where they could not form grammatical sentences. As a result, non-human animals are not moral agents because they lack the capacities for rationality and empathy.

Furthermore, the capacity for moral autonomy has a distinct moral significance because it helps individuals freely reduce the overall suffering in the world. For instance, when a lion sees an injured animal, it will usually take advantage of the situation and attack it. However, a person can assess the situation and choose to help the wounded animal. Lions do not use reason to make decisions and have no conception of right and wrong. They operate on their instincts and generally do not care about the well-being of other animals. On the other hand, a human can use its conception of right and wrong to look after the welfare of other animals. Since our notion of what is right or wrong gives us the ability to minimize suffering in the world, it is morally relevant.

Moral agents are important because beings that can act morally are required to sacrifice their interests for the sake of others.¹⁵ It follows that those that do sacrifice their good for the sake of others are owed greater concern from those that benefit from such sacrifices. Since animals cannot act morally, they will not sacrifice their good for the sake of others but will pursue

¹⁵ Scott D Wilson, "Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy."

their good even at the expense of others.¹⁶ That is why human beings should give the interests of other human beings greater weight than they do the interests of animals. Because other non-human animals fail to possess this capacity, moral autonomy should give human beings greater moral consideration.

Singer would provide two objections to my claim that the capacity for moral agency grants all human beings an equal and higher moral status than other non-human animals. The first objection includes the argument from marginal cases. Singer's version can be formulated as follows:¹⁷

P1: To conclude that all and only human beings deserve a full and equal moral status, there must be some property P that all and only human beings have that can ground such a claim.

P2: Any P that only human beings have is a property that some human beings lack.

P3: Any P that all human beings have is a property that most animals have as well.

C1: Therefore, there is no way to defend the claim that all and only human beings deserve a full and equal moral status.

For Singer's first premise, if only humans deserve moral consideration, then they must possess some morally relevant capacity that animals lack. For instance, perhaps humans deserve moral consideration because we have moral agency, unlike other animals.

The second premise challenges us to find a morally relevant property that is exclusive to humans. Some people may contend that humans deserve greater moral consideration than other animals because we have some morally relevant characteristic—like moral agency or rationality—that other animals do not possess. However, some humans—the severely disabled or coma patients—lack the capacity for moral agency or rationality. These humans are considered to be marginal cases because they often lack the required capacities that we use to

¹⁶ Scott D Wilson, "Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy."

¹⁷ Scott D Wilson, "Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy."

differentiate ourselves from other non-human animals. As a result, no P entitles humans to exclusively receive moral consideration.

The third premise is similar to the second premise because it also forces us to find a morally relevant characteristic that only humans have. Furthermore, the morally relevant properties that marginal cases do possess are not exclusive to humans. Non-human animals have the same morally relevant capacities that marginal cases possess like the capacity to feel pain. Consequently, there is no P that all human beings have that other animals do not also have. Singer's three claims provide sufficient support for his conclusion: There is no way to defend the claim that all and only human beings deserve a full and equal moral status.

For the first premise, I already argued that the capacity for moral agency is a property P that grants all human beings an equal and higher moral status. The second premise comes into conflict with my thesis by stating that not all humans possess the capacity for moral agency. Because some humans lack this property, there is no justification to declare that all humans ought to have a full and equal moral status. As long as we assign moral standing based on abilities and capacities, certain marginal cases will be excluded from the moral category. The third premise does not affect my argument since I have already demonstrated that animals lack moral agency.

As an objection to the second premise, I will use the argument from species normality. The argument states that the moral status of a being is determined not by the properties and abilities she does have. But, instead, it is determined by the properties and abilities that are normal for her species, and thus are the properties and abilities she should have.¹⁸ As a result, the moral status of an individual should depend on what is typical of that particular species.

The argument from species normality claims that there is a way that the members of our species should be. Two of the properties human beings should have are the ability to act morally and to be autonomous. Some people lack moral agency, which is called marginal cases:

¹⁸ Scott D. Wilson, "The Species-Norm Account of Moral Status."

the cognitively impaired. First, when considering the entire human population, marginal cases make up a small percentage of people. Critics might consider babies to be marginal cases, but in reality, they will develop the capacity for moral agency in a short amount of time. Furthermore, even marginal cases—that lack the distinctive capacities to act morally and be autonomous—are equally valuable precisely because they are the sorts of beings that should have these value-conferring properties.¹⁹

If we compare someone that is cognitively impaired with a typical dog, for instance, we may find that they both have similar abilities and capacities. However, the moral status of the human being is higher than the moral status of the typical dog. Although the human being does not have the abilities and capacities normal for his species, he should have them. Therefore, since he is the kind of being that should have those abilities and capacities, he should have the same moral status as any other human being.²⁰ The dog, on the other hand, is not unfortunate for lacking moral agency and does not deserve any kind of compensation for being in the state in which it exists. The dog's moral status will depend on the abilities and capacities that are normal for its species. Since autonomy and moral acts are not normal for dogs, the dog will not deserve a full and equal moral status. The property of being a part of a species whose members should be autonomous and able to act morally is something all humans have, which allows for a unique moral status.²¹

The reason that a being with abilities and capacities that fall below those normal for his species should have the same moral status as the other members of his species is that he has suffered a loss. This loss has made him unfortunate, and so he deserves some compensation for that loss.²² Humans generally possess the capacity for moral agency, so that capacity needs to be recognized and respected, even in marginal cases. The argument from species normality

¹⁹ Scott D. Wilson, "The Species-Norm Account of Moral Status."

²⁰ Scott D. Wilson, "The Species-Norm Account of Moral Status."

²¹ Scott D. Wilson, "The Species-Norm Account of Moral Status."

²² Scott D. Wilson, "The Species-Norm Account of Moral Status."

illustrates that premises two and three are false because we do have a morally relevant property that is exclusive to humans (i.e., moral agency), which makes Singer's argument from marginal cases unsound.

The second objection to my thesis that Singer would state involves the sophisticated inegalitarian argument. Singer maintains that if we were to rely on these sorts of properties (e.g., moral agency) as the basis of determining moral status, then we would justify a kind of discrimination against certain human beings that is analogous to practices like racism and sexism.²³ For example, if intelligence, rationality, moral agency, etc., are morally important and provide distinctions in moral standing, then we should separate humans based on their level of intelligence, rationality, etc. So people who perform many virtuous acts deserve extra consideration because differences in moral agency can ground differences in moral standing. If the difference in moral agency between human beings is not relevant, why should it be relevant when comparing human beings and animals?²⁴

For the sophisticated inegalitarian argument to succeed, it must target properties that admit degrees. If someone argued that the basis of human equality rested on the possession of a property that did not admit degrees, it would not follow that some human beings have that property to a stronger degree than others.²⁵ Because moral agency comes in varying degrees within humans, Singer contends that the more virtuous person should receive a higher moral status.

As a response to the sophisticated inegalitarian argument, I could admit that moral agency is a morally relevant property that comes in degrees in humans; however, this capacity does not exist in other animals since they lack rationality and empathy. Simply having the capacity is what should matter because people can always work to refine it. Frequently

²³ Scott D. Wilson, "The Species-Norm Account of Moral Status."

²⁴ Scott D. Wilson, "The Species-Norm Account of Moral Status."

²⁵ Scott D Wilson, "Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy."

exercising your moral agency and performing good actions should be encouraged and rewarded, but it does not follow that a more moral person deserves a higher status.

According to the argument from species normality, if what grounds an individual's moral status are the capacities and abilities normal for the members of her species, then it will follow that every member of our species will have the same moral status.²⁶ When assigning moral status to an individual, the average capacity of the species is what is taken into account. Capacities, like moral agency, exist on a spectrum for humans. Some people will be very virtuous and constantly sacrifice their interests for the sake of others. Conversely, some people will lack righteous behavior and only look after their own interests. However, what is typical for that particular species is the only method for ascribing moral status. Thus, the difference in moral agency between people does not matter and allows us to avoid the sophisticated inegalitarian argument.

In conclusion, Singer believes that humans do not possess any unique characteristic that entitles all and only humans to direct and equal moral consideration. He uses the argument from marginal cases and the sophisticated inegalitarian argument to support his claim. However, I have used the argument from species normality to declare that people exclusively possess moral agency and that should grant all human beings an equal and higher moral status than other non-human animals.

²⁶ Scott D. Wilson, "The Species-Norm Account of Moral Status."

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