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Mrs. X’s Kidnapping

Imagine you have been asked to make an ethical choice: either hang a fifty-five-year-old woman convicted of securities fraud, or do nothing and your captor, Mrs. X, will kill a bear with razorblades in the stomach. You are forced to choose an option by Mrs. X. This paper will explore the ethical considerations of choosing either option. Is it right to torture an animal to prevent an almost instant death of a human? Is it ever okay to value a non-human’s pain over a human’s pain? These are the types of questions to consider when investigating the morality and ethics of choosing either path. Kant, Singer, and Bentham have spent their lives exploring ethical conundrums. In an effort to research the right thing to do, this paper will interpret their ideas.

Emanuel Kant, a man who invented his own theory of ethics (Kantianism), argues that animals are not persons because they are not rational or conscious beings capable of morality. However, humans should treat animals well because it develops good character and strong morals. Basically, Kant wants his readers to see that a human’s duties to treating animals in a respectful manner are indirectly responsible for having better morals in general. He asserts that you will treat humans better if you treat animals better. Kant is the philosopher who invented this process: identify a maxim, then apply it to everyone, and then see if society would collapse. This is deciding a maxim’s morality based on if everyone could do that without collapsing society. In this case, one might interpret that Kant would want to save the human being because he doesn’t think that animals are capable of morality. However, based on Kant’s belief that treating animals with dignity is a good example for treating humans well, he may reason that torturing a bear would be more immoral, or lead to degenerating morals in a human. Kantianism suggests that a horrific death of internal bleeding is much worse than breaking someone’s neck in a hanging, meaning it leads to a decline in morality. Furthermore, using Kant’s own process: if everyone commits securities fraud like this woman does, then our economy and therefore society, would collapse. Thus, this fifty-five-year-old woman is actively contributing to the downfall of society and is a moral defector. A bear is not capable of being a defector. A bear can’t create a maxim that would break society. For these reasons, I think Kant would hang the woman and save the bear because it would lead to better morals in the person making the choice to act or not.

Peter Singer argues that an animal’s rights are important and, in fact, is the next rights campaign for human society. He equates the civil rights movement or woman’s voting rights to the animal rights movement. Singer wants the reader to see that animals can feel pain just like humans can. This alludes to Bentham’s views on animal cruelty: animals can feel or suffer so we can’t be cruel to them because it is inflicting dolors. Singer also defines the idea of “speciesism”. Speciesism is a prejudice that favors one’s own species over another species. He is clearly against the idea of speciesism and is quick to criticize those who subscribe to it. It seems clear that Singer would choose to hang the woman because it is more humane of a death than a death by razorblade ingestion. Singer would justify his decision by claiming choosing the option to feed a bear razor blades would be textbook “speciesism”.

Jeremy Bentham states, “The question is not, Can they reason? nor Can they *talk*? but, *Can they suffer*?” He is making the point that we should look at morality in terms of suffering or dolors rather than if a creature is high minded. This is similar to what Singer says, but Bentham is not as anti-speciesism as Singer. So, the question becomes: does human suffering matter more than animal suffering? In terms of this argument, assuming the woman’s neck breaks from the rope, there is extremely little suffering for her as opposed to the bear. If one assumes the bear’s dolors compared to the woman’s dolors for this type of death is a thousand to one and this person also assumes man’s dolors don’t matter a thousand times more than this bears, than the bears dolors are more important. So the right thing to do, according to Bentham, would be to kill the woman.

Another thing to consider in this quandary is that one choice is an active option and one choice is a passive option. Meaning one option you must perform an action and the other doesn’t require action. “Negative responsibility” states that you are guilty through inaction as well as action. But there are some that believe in “positive responsibility”; you are not preforming the action of feeding the bear razorblade steaks then you are not responsible for it. So, if you believe in positive responsibility then the choice to do nothing (and save the woman) is an obvious choice.

So, you must make this ethical choice: either hang a fifty-five-year-old woman convicted of securities fraud or, do nothing. If you do nothing, your captor Mrs. X will kill a bear with razorblades in the stomach. You can say that the active action is the wrong action, or that a bears dolors don’t matter as much as mine. But, if you like the idea of speciesism, the ethics of Kantianism, or you believe this animal’s dolors are more important than the woman’s, then you will kill the woman. Is it right to torture an animal over an almost instant death of a human? No. Is it ever okay to value a non-human’s pain over a human’s pain? Yes. These are my answers to these moral questions. Kant, Singer, and Bentham have spent their lives looking at ethical problems, and, according to my take on their ethics they would agree with me. What would you say?