

### **Analysis of “Against the Moral Standing of Animals”**

#### **Horta’s argument**

- I. If a particular characteristic is what morally justified assigning less weight to the interests of nonhuman animals (i.e. speciesism), then it also justifies assigning less weight to the interests of those humans who lack that particular capability.
- II. (Implicit) Respecting someone entails giving the same weight to their interests compared with the interests of other persons.
- III. All human beings should be respected (regardless of their cognitive capabilities, etc.).
- IV. The interests of every human should be given equal weight to the analogous interests of every other human (despite whether they have or not a particular characteristic such as those mentioned before).
- V. Therefore, speciesism is not morally justified.

#### **Argument Reconstruction**

Assumption 1: Animals are not rational agents.

Assumption 2: Contractualist moral theory is the best moral theory for a society.

- I. If an entity is a rational agent then it possesses moral standing.
- II. Animals are not rational agents, and most humans are rational agents.
- III. The humans who are rational agents provide moral standing to humans that are not rational agents (ie senile old humans or infants) as they have emotional attachment to them and through contractualist moral theory it is in the benefit for all agents to provide the non-rational agent humans moral standing.
- IV. Rational agents are not directly emotionally attached to animals, therefore animals are not granted moral standing.
- V. Therefore, no animals possess moral standing, and all humans do possess moral standing.

In this argument, Carruther defines rational agents as creatures capable of changing their behavior to be in compliance with some set of universal rules (for example, “don’t steal”). They should be able to understand the benefits and consequences of adopting certain rules in their community as a whole. He also states that, in contractualism, morals are not naturally occurring concepts, instead they are brought into existence through contracts rational beings make with each other.

### **Argument Analysis + Thesis**

Carruther relies on two important assumptions to build his argument. The first being that animals are not rational agents and the second being that contractualism is the best moral theory for a society. Then he states that rational agents are the only entities that can have moral standing through his contractualism assumption (premise, I). His other assumption about animals not being rational agents allows him to state that animals are not rational, therefore don’t have moral standing, and that most humans are rational agents and therefore those humans have moral standing (premise, II). He then justifies that all humans, even the non-rational agents, have moral standing by arguing that infants and senile old people will be given rights by rational human beings due to their emotional attachment (premise, III). He also justifies animals lacking moral standing by stating that rational humans are not directly emotionally attached to animals, and therefore do not need to provide them any moral standing (premise IV). This leads to the conclusion that no animals possess moral standing, and all humans do possess moral standing (conclusion, V).

I believe that there are a few problems with Carruther’s argument, but my main objections lie with the assumption (assumption 2) Carruther makes about contractualism being the best moral theory, or at least in his interpretation of contractualism. Carruther describes contractualism in two distinct ways.

- (a) The first description of contractualism is a set of moral rules (or “agreements”) that would be agreed upon by all rational beings from behind a veil of ignorance.
- (b) The second description is a set of moral rules that no rational being rejects, where every rational being has full access to their circumstances and a power to veto rules that are unfair to them.

Carruther also stresses the point that since contractualism gives rise to morality it cannot be that the rational agents had a set of morals beforehand. He uses both definitions of contractualism in his later points to justify that his argument is true in general with contractualism, and not for just one form of contractualism.

### **Argument objection**

My main issue with Carruther’s argument is that we want to have morality defined in a way it can be applied universally, and contractualism does not account for this. However, Carruther

uses contractualism as if it leads to one set of morals that are applied to everyone. I believe this is an invalid interpretation of contractualism, because contractualism inherently depends on the extent of a rational individual's interaction to decide the extent of the individual's morality. Essentially, contractualism implies the more you engage with society, the more contracts you create with other rational agents and the more morals you have. For example, a hermit (ie someone who has distanced themselves from interacting with other rational agents) may not need to have any set of moral rules to follow as they have not created any "contracts" with other members of society - but they still can have moral rules that they follow such as "not harming animals unnecessarily". This directly contradicts contractualism stating that all morals arise from contracts made between rational agents. Therefore, as contractualism does not account for morality universally, you cannot say that animals do not have moral standing.

### **Objection**

An objection to my argument might go as follows: morality only applies to rational agents since the rational agents are the only ones that can perceive and act on morality. Therefore, it should be irrelevant whether or not contractualism accounts for morality universally, as it only matters for how it governs the mannerisms of the rational agents.

### **Response**

I would agree with the objection to the extent that morality is only needed for rational agents, as they are the only ones that will act upon those moral rules. However, the objection misinterprets what is meant by contractualism not accounting for morality universally. Accounting for morality universally would mean that the moral rules created by contractualism account for everything, not just interactions with other rational agents. Therefore, it matters that there should be separate moral rules to interact with non-rational agents governed by some other guidelines.

### **Citations**

Carruthers, Peter. "Against the Moral Standing of Animals".

<https://faculty.philosophy.umd.edu/pcarruthers/The%20Animals%20Issue.pdf>