

HS0.303: Applied Ethics

Assignment 2

Q:

Read the essays by Peter Singer, Tom Regan, Mary Anne Warren, Alastair Norcross, and R.G. Frey on animal ethics (in Shafer-Landau, pp. 221-264):

- a) Summarize their arguments and critically examine the ethical framework they are adopting in arguing for their position.
- b) Evaluate which of these positions you find ethical and justify your position.

Word limit: 2500 - 3000

a. Summary of the essays:

Peter Singer: All Animals Are Equal

In "All Animals are Equal", Peter Singer presents his arguments to contend against the traditional view of humans as the most superior species. Singer begins by mentioning recent liberation movements against discrimination or the supremacy of one race over another. For example, the Black liberation movement aimed to end the notion of blacks as second-order citizens. He argues that just as every human is different and possesses different characteristics that make him a unique identity but makes humans inherently unequal. These pre-existing differences are not only social such as caste, creed, or gender but there are physical differences, such as physical strength and intellectual capacity. Singer argues that we acknowledge the differences among humans and advocate for equal rights for everyone, and we should also extend this attitude towards members of other species. He adds, "In other words, I am urging that we extend to other species the basic principle of equality that most of us recognize should be extended to all members of our species." However, in this notion of equality, Singer isn't arguing about a moral principle that requires equal treatment for every species, but instead, he advocates for equal consideration of interests. Singer's idea of equal consideration of interests says that identical interests should weigh the same irrespective of whose interests they are.

Singer's argument is based on the ethical principle of utilitarianism, which holds that actions are right or wrong based on their consequences. According to utilitarianism, the morally right action is the one that produces the best or the least amount of harm. Singer applies this principle to the treatment of animals.

Singer's argument is based on the premise that all sentient beings have several common interests, such as getting food, staying warm and not getting tortured. He argues that it is morally wrong to inflict unnecessary suffering on animals. However, animals must go through various levels of torture daily in the name of food, clothes, experiments, and medicine test without their consent. Singer argues that rationality can not be a factor of division between humans and non-humans. As if we say, humans are superior because we possess rationality. Babies and Alzheimer patients possess no rationality; still, we protect them against any form of torture which we let non-humans go through. This behaviour makes us what Singer says speciesist. He argues that killing someone whose intellectual capacity is similar to or lesser than an animal would be equally wrong to kill an animal. Another example is we depend on animals for food for their taste as the nutrient requirements can be achieved through plant-based diets, and also we test the animals. However, humans have to consent to any medical test, and they can decline to proceed at any moment, which is not the case with animals.

Tom Regan: The Case for Animal Rights

Tom Regan wrote the essay "The Case for Animal Rights" in 1985 to highlight the problematic stances of various philosophical schools about animal rights.

Regan talks about contractarianism, which states that morality is a contract with other members of society for the mutual protection of everyone's rights. And since animals don't possess rationality, they cannot understand the moral contract and hence can not be part of it. However, if we go along the lines of contractarianism, babies and humans who lack rationality because of intellect limits also cannot sign the contract. As a result, the value of babies, non-human species and non-living objects should have equal moral value, but this is not true in any moral society.

Further, Regan considers utilitarianism, the belief that the right course of action is the one that will give the greatest happiness to the greatest number of people. According to utilitarianism, any action is morally right if it generates greater happiness for a more significant number of people when it comes to conflict between the two ideas. If killing an elder to inherit the riches benefits the new generations, utilitarianism approves of it. Regan believes this idea is not morality but the rule of the majority over minorities. And when it comes to the case of animals, if the whole community decides to kill any animal in the name of danger or food, then utilitarianism approves of it. And this disregards the value of animal life and even human life.

In his essay, Regan states that the animal rights movement should not be limited to fighting against animal cruelty but protecting animal interests. He talks about how animals also go through experiences similar to us, which makes them the subject of life, and therefore they also deserve moral consideration. Further, Regan argues that a subject of life possess their intelligence and are aware of their existence, and they also have their own set of preferences about how they want to live. For Regan, every subject of life is equally essential, resulting in fundamental moral rights for every species. Regan argues that just as humans won't agree to be used as food for any other species or be treated as a subject of an experiment in a laboratory, other subjects of life also possess an awareness of how they want to be treated. Therefore, disregarding the animal's interests without knowing their consent makes all these actions immoral.

Mary Anne Warren: Difficulties with the Strong Animal Rights Position

In the essay "Difficulties with the Strong Animal Rights Position", Mary Anne Warren analyses Tom Regan's "The Case for Animal Rights". Regan is known for his advocacy of equal rights for humans and animals, and this stance aligns him with a Strong Animal rights position, which is visible in his essay.

To begin with, Warren questions Regan's stance on the idea of inherent value, where he claims that all subjects of life possess a specific inherent value and that any human or non-human entity which possesses some inherent value should possess equal rights. Warren argues that inherent value should not be used to determine whether anything is correct. Firstly, Regan fails to define what inherent value is. If he does not consider the case where non-living entities such as natural marvels might possess some inherent worth, does it also make sense to assign rights to them?

Additionally, Regan claims that every human or non-human subject of life should possess equal rights, but he fails to show why their rights are equal. Warren acknowledges that animals possess certain rights as they are also sentient beings. Still, she questions the extent upto which animals should possess rights, unlike Regan, who considers that rationality should not be the basis of rights. Warren believes that the purpose of morality is to resolve conflicts efficiently and through non-violence, and rationality is essential to achieve this goal. And as animals don't possess rationality, it should be natural to have "animal rights weaker than human rights".

Warren argues that the strong animal rights position would lead to absurd results. She gives the example of a hypothetical situation in which a human and an animal are both in danger of drowning. But for her, it would be moral to save a human as humans can reason and give animals the same rights as humans would be unjustified in such a situation.

Alastair Norcross: Puppies, Pigs and People: Eating Meat and Marginal Cases

Norcross begins with the fictional world of Fred, a man searching for a particular hormone found only in severely tortured puppies. This hormone allows Fred to experience the pleasure of eating chocolate as he lost his ability to experience it after a brain injury.

Therefore, Fred argues that human pleasure is of a superior order and will continue torturing the puppies to obtain the hormone to experience the pleasure of chocolate again and again. Norcross opens with this outrageous setting to explain how the argument of meat eaters is also none the same. Just as Fred can survive without experiencing the pleasure of chocolates, Norcross says humans can survive without eating meat by relying on plant-based resources for nutrient requirements. Still, we continue factory farming to satisfy our taste buds without moral reason.

In the essay, Norcross comes up with different arguments to counter the premises given by meat eaters. He counts meat eaters who know about the cruelty in factory farms as equally accountable as those who are running them; despite the arguments that how a small individual effort can make a change in the massive capitalist world, the meat eaters did not kill that animal, and they did not persuade someone to kill the animal. Norcross argues that the pleasure one attains from eating meat is far smaller than the animal's suffering in factory farms. Moreover, he refuses to believe that small insignificant purchases cannot bring any change. Yes, an individual purchase might be insignificant for a billion-dollar industry, but even if 1% of consumers stop eating meat, fewer animals suffer due to reduced demand.

Further, he introduces the argument from marginal cases, which says we should treat animals equally to marginal human beings as both have equally developed mental lives. If we treat both the same, we should be equally hesitant to an animal as we are to kill and eat a marginal human. He adds that if someone sympathizes with marginal humans, he should also sympathize with the animals.

Next, he discusses the discourse of being a moral agent and a moral patient. In this section, he argues that we are moral agents as we can respond to moral reasons and control our actions. However, the animals are moral patients, lacking the cognitive skills required to be moral agents. Therefore, a moral agent's duty should be to help moral patients and protect them against exploitation.

RG Frey: Moral Standing, the Value of Lives and Speciesism

In his essay, Raymond Frey brings forward his unequal value thesis, which many accuse of as a version of speciesism. In his thesis, Frey claims that human life is more valuable than animal life. However, he aims not to rely upon the arguments given by a speciesist. The classical speciesism argument claims humans' ability to possess rationality makes us superior to other animals. However, Frey argues that the value of life makes humans a superior species. Frey argues that humans can do every activity an animal can do. Apart from having common interests such as food, shelter and love, humans can enrich their lives to a greater extent because of their intellectual capacity or other talents.

Moreover, humans are more productive when adding value to nature by various means. One common criticism of his thesis is comparing the value of life for a marginal human being or an infant with an animal. To tackle this, Frey compares the value of life for a fit adult individual to an old Alzheimer patient. A fit individual can conduct various tasks and is more productive. Moreover, the old patient must depend on others to advance. He openly agrees that the old patient is a less valuable human than others, and to escape speciesism, he adds that several animals would be more valuable than similar humans., i.e., some animals possess a better quality of life than some humans.

Frey argues that one might possess natural bias towards their species, but to make a decision, the value of action is essential. Now, suppose we assign equal value to different species. In that case, we are not acknowledging their pre-existing differences and capacities to add value at different levels, which is an example of an ignorance claim. Therefore, it is okay for Frey to assign a higher value to humans even if we don't know the value of life for other species.

b. Critical analysis of ethical frameworks presented in given essays and my position

Out of all the five ethical frameworks presented by different authors, I believe Alastair Norcross and Mary Anne Warren presented the most balanced theory that could form the ethical framework for animal rights in our world.

Singer's idea of equal consideration of interests says that identical interests should weigh the same irrespective of whose interests they are. Moreover, he adds that we should not divide the species based on rationality as we take measures to provide a stable life to humans without rationality. However, Singer's idea that all sentient beings should have rights brings its share of moral problems. Plants are also considered living beings; we can observe the response of certain plants, such as Touch Me Not. Now just as the suffering of an animal would be immoral, then going by the same argument, eating a plant without their consent should be immoral too.

Moreover, the author did not answer if an animal's rights are taken away by a different animal. For example, a dog is attacking a cat. Then, in such situations, should we intervene to protect the cat or not? Ethical questions like these are also not answered by Singer.

Tom Regan has an extreme animal rights position and is often celebrated within the community of people fighting for animal rights. However, Warren's argument in her critical analysis of Regan's essay raises several important questions that Regan fails to answer. The indifference between different species often becomes the basis of judgements regarding their conflicts. Although I agree with Warren's criticism of Regan, she does not consider rationality an excellent reason to make decisions. However, I believe the ability to reason and control our actions makes human rights more important than animal rights.

The argument presented by Norcross is the most balanced and with a minimum number of flaws. He mentions how meat eaters who know about the cruelty in factory farms are equally accountable to those running them. Moreover, he presents the cases against meat eaters' common arguments and refutes them logically. Rather than focusing on an individual effect, he focused on the cumulative effect of an event entirely rational. Unlike Regan, who says all subjects of life are equal, he divides them into two categories, moral agents and moral patients. And the coexistence of both without exploiting one is necessary for the smooth functioning of the natural ecosystem. This also answers the ethical problem presented by Warren, where she asks if animals need any rights at all or not.

Regarding Raymond Frey, I agree that all species are unequal, and certain species hold abilities to do a fixed number of tasks. In contrast, humans are more productive when adding value to nature by various means. He comes up with his idea of ranking the species based on the value they add. This argument by Frey does not make sense to me as one can not come up with any mathematical function to determine the value added by different species in the form of numbers. Bees are the most significant pollinators on earth, and without the pollination of flowers, the human race can't survive. Even though small insects, ants and other species cannot reason, the survival of humans without them is impossible. Does it make them higher species? No. Frey fails to understand that human life survived centuries on earth because it coexisted with other species.

Moreover, Frey's parameters exemplify natural bias, where all the deciding factors to add value are activities where humans can naturally excel. There might be a balanced way to measure the value added by different species when comparing different species, but this also can not tell us which species should be given rights above any value.

References:

1. Shafer-Landau R (2018) Living ethics: An introduction with readings.