

W11 Workshop Exercise: Video Games and Simulated Violence

Selection from:

Elton, Matthew (2000). "Should Vegetarians Play Video Games?" *Philosophical Papers* 29(1): 21-42

Hint: From Elton/Kant's thoughts about what is wrong with kicking a dog, you should be able to extract a moral principle that seems to be at work in the background, even if they don't state it explicitly. If you can make out what that principle is (or what it needs to be), that should enable you to to bridge the argument from the wrongness of kicking dogs to the wrongness of simulating harm to video game human avatars.

p.21

We are going to ignore
Eaton's own preferred
argument...

p.22

...and focus on this Kantian argument that he describes (without fully endorsing.)

Step 1: Why is it wrong to harm a dog?

Step 2: explaining the wrongness on a deeper level.

Step 3: Applying what we've learned to video games.

There are two very different strategies that one can pursue in arguing that vegetarians should not play video games. One, which I intend to pursue at length in the paper, argues against such game playing on the grounds of the harm it does to the animated agent. The other, which draws on a famous argument from Kant, argues against such game playing on the grounds of the harm it does to the player. I'll briefly comment on this latter argument, so as to set it to one side, before turning to the former.

Very roughly, Kant argued that the reason you shouldn't kick a dog is not that the dog might suffer, or that such an action exhibits a failure to respect the dog as an agent, but rather that in treating a dog this way you run the risk of making yourself a brutal person. A brutal person is one who is insufficiently resistant to mistreating other people. But why does kicking your dog brutalise you if it is not actually doing the dog any harm? After all, kicking a stone does not brutalise. I think the answer is simply this. If one denies, as Kant might as well deny, that the dog itself is relevantly different from a stone, you still have its behaviour to contend with. When you kick her, a dog does a pretty good impression, as it were, of what a person does when kicked. We can say, then, that the dog *represents* a genuine agent, that is she *represents* the kind of agent for whom we ought to show a certain respect and moral concern. According to this sort of reasoning, then, kicking stones is not a problem, but kicking stones with, say, faces painted on them, may well be. Such stones are very poor representations of people, but they are representations nonetheless, and hence, presumably, carry some risk of brutalising the kicker.

If this argument is successful, then it looks as though the vegetarian is in trouble. For there are many video games which involve the representation of cruelty both to animals, which indirectly represent people, and to people themselves. Even if the processes in the computer are no more complex than the crashing together of a pile of rocks the images on the screen are often vivid representations of people. I have some doubts about the