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THE MORAL STANDING OF ANIMALS

Twenty-six hundred years ago Aristotle wrote: “Plants exist for the sake of animals, and brute beasts for the sake of man – domestic animals for his use and food, wild ones (or at any rate most of them) for food and other accessories of life, such as clothing and various tools”. For Aristotle, the sole purpose of animals’ existence was to serve human beings as tools of navigating our distinct needs and wants. In the two millennia since Aristotle, despite progress in many areas, animals have continued to be perceived as objects to be used in whatever way their possessors see fit, even by the most intellectual minds. In the 17th century, for example, Descartes, the father of modern philosophy, infamously argued that non-human animals were machines, incapable of consciousness and hence incapable of feeling pain – an argument that validated the growing trend of conducting experimentation on animals across Europe using horrific methods.

Fortunately, this is not the predominant view about animals anymore. Thanks to various advances in the sciences and philosophy, many people believe nowadays that many animals, like humans, have interests – to live, to form social groups, to avoid pain – that demand to be respected by us. The central question I want to explore in this short essay is: What, exactly, is it about animals that makes them worthy of moral consideration? In other words, *in virtue of what* do creatures have moral standing? In answering this question I will have to leave aside other interesting questions, such as how we ought to weigh human interests against animal interests, or whether different species of animals have different ‘levels’ of moral standing.

What was “obvious” to most people throughout history – that animals are just objects – should not be and is not obvious anymore. Consider: destroying a neighbor’s car and torturing a neighbor’s cat seem like different sorts of evils: destroying a car wrongs the neighbor because it is his property; torturing a cat, by contrast, wrongs not only the its owner, but first and foremost wrongs *the cat*. A cat, like a human being but unlike a car, has moral standing: a cat can be *wronged*; its existence is a source of a *moral obligation* for us.

In contemporary ethics there are two predominant ways of justifying the claim that animals have moral standing. Some philosophers have argued that animals have moral

standing because they are sentient, i.e. able to feel pain and pleasure. The sentience view can be traced back to Jeremy Bentham's famous claim that, when assessing whether we are obligated to act toward animals in a certain way, "the question is not, Can they *reason*? nor, Can they *talk*? but, Can they *suffer*?". More recently, Princeton philosopher Peter Singer has argued in a similar vein that the only thing that warrants moral consideration is whether the creature in question can feel pain and pleasure, not how intelligent it is, nor how sophisticated its plans for life are, whether it has free will, and so on. According to Singer, belonging to one species (such as homo sapiens) rather than another is completely irrelevant from the ethical perspective – species membership is morally arbitrary in the same way that hair color or height are. But if a creature can feel pain, we are obligated not to harm it – at least not without a good reason. Such a view, admittedly, leaves room for more nuanced questions, such as 'What is the moral 'threshold' for inflicting some amount of pain on an animal?'. For example: Could we kill 1,000 lions if this was the only way to save a person? Could we kill 10 rabbits if this was the only way to save two dogs?

Other moral philosophers, such as Tom Regan and Christine Korsgaard, have argued that animals have moral standing because, like humans, they can form and follow specific plans and have preferences about how their life unfolds. In this view, animals have moral standing by virtue of possessing some degree of 'prudential rationality'. Their cognitive and emotional capacities are the same in kind, if not degree, as human cognitive and emotional capacities: animals have preferences, desires, beliefs, and memories; they can form expectations and experience happiness or frustration; they care about the quality of their life. This view does not take a single ability of a creature (such as feeling pain) to be decisive when it comes to the question of moral standing. Rather, the view is that many abilities (such as having desires and forming beliefs about the world) contribute to, and collectively constitute, moral standing. Moreover, the model for which abilities are relevant for moral assessment is the human being: animals are argued to be worthy of moral consideration precisely because they resemble the default bearer of moral standing – the human being – in so many ways.

Interestingly, no matter what it is about animals that makes them a source of moral obligations, not all species of animals will possess this quality to the same degree. For

example, a dolphin's cognitive capacities are much more sophisticated than a worm's. So, once we have drawn the line between a species' having moral standing and not having it, a further question is how to weigh the moral interests of various species, given that their morally relevant capacities seem to come in degrees.

It is known that at least some species of invertebrates do not feel pain. Because of this, on Bentham and Singer's model of moral standing these species of invertebrates do not need to be morally respected in any way. But does it follow that we can thus make whatever use we want with such 'unsophisticated' animals? Not necessarily. Perhaps the limitations on our actions toward such animals will come from elsewhere, such as from environmental considerations. Regardless of where exactly we draw the line between a species' having moral standing and not having it, and regardless of which feature of animals we take to be responsible for their moral standing, we can all do more to improve the lives of domestic and wild animals.