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1
Ethics, Animals and Nature

Peter Singer

Introduction: choosing among non-speciesist ethics

Here is a very brief summary of a position that I have defended on many occasions, most fully in my book *Animal Liberation*:[1]

> Our present treatment of animals is based on speciesism, that is, a bias or prejudice towards members of our own species, and against members of other species. Speciesism is an ethically indefensible form of discrimination against beings on the basis of their membership of a species other than our own. All sentient beings have interests, and we should give equal consideration to their interests, irrespective of whether they are members of our species or of another species.

My aim in this chapter is to defend this position against criticisms from two sides: from those who seek to defend a speciesist ethic, and from those who think that extending ethics to all sentient beings does not go far enough. The latter criticism, in particular, is the focus of this essay. While animal liberationists and deep ecologists agree that ethics must be extended beyond the human species, they differ in how far that extension can intelligibly go. If a tree is not sentient, then it makes no difference *to the tree* whether we chop it down or not. It may, of course, make a great difference to human beings, present or future, and to nonhuman animals who live in the tree, or in the forest of which it is a part. Animal liberationists would judge the wrongness of cutting down the tree in terms of the impact of the act on other sentient beings, whereas deep ecologists would see it as a wrong done to the tree, or perhaps to the forest or the larger ecosystem. The question is whether it is possible to ground an ethic on wrongs done to beings who are unable

to experience in any way the wrong done to them, or any consequences of those wrongs.

From the perspective of deep ecologists, an ethic limited to sentient beings seems to stick too closely to traditional ethical viewpoints. It is, for example, compatible with classical utilitarianism, which judges acts as right or wrong by asking whether they will lead to a greater surplus of pleasure over pain than any other act open to the agent. As the great classical utilitarian writers – Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill and Henry Sidgwick – all made clear, the boundaries of 'pleasure' and 'pain' do not stop at the boundary of our species.[2] The pleasures and pains of animals must be taken into the calculation. This is not to say that a non-speciesist ethic concerned about individual animals must be a utilitarian ethic. Many different ethics are compatible with this approach, including an ethic based on rights, as Tom Regan has ably argued.[3] Similarly, a feminist ethic based on the idea of extending our sympathy to others can reach a similar conclusion.[4]

The traditional view

While an ethic that includes all sentient beings as direct objects of our ethical concern is certainly not as radical a break from traditional ethics as some form of deep ecology that seeks to include all living things, in the context of the dominant Western ethical tradition it remains quite revolutionary. We all know the key passages in this tradition:

> And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.
>
> So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.
>
> And God blessed them, and God said upon them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.[5]

According to the dominant Western tradition, the natural world exists for the benefit of human beings. God gave human beings dominion over the natural world, and God does not care how we treat it. Human beings are the only morally important members of this world. Nature itself is of

no intrinsic value, and the destruction of plants and animals cannot be sinful, unless by this destruction we harm human beings.

The traditional Judaeo-Christian view of the world is based on a creation myth that was decisively refuted more than a century ago. At least since Darwin, we have known that the forests and animals were not placed on earth for us to use. They have evolved alongside us. The assumptions that derive from that myth, however, are still with us. If we can succeed in clearing them away, the consequences for our way of living will be as far reaching as any changes in human history have ever been.

Ethics across the species barrier

In any serious exploration of environmental values a central issue will be whether there is anything of intrinsic value beyond human beings. To explore this question we first need to understand the notion of 'intrinsic value'. Something is of intrinsic value if it is good or desirable *in itself*; the contrast is with 'instrumental value', that is value as a means to some other end or purpose. Our own happiness, for example, is of intrinsic value, at least to most of us, in that we desire it for its own sake. Money, on the other hand, is only of instrumental value to us. We want it because of the things we can buy with it, but if we were marooned on a desert island, we would not want it. (Whereas happiness would be just as important to us on a desert island as anywhere else.)

Now consider any issue in which the interests of human beings clash with the interests of nonhuman animals. Since we are here concerned especially with environmental issues, I'll take as an example the whaling industry, which is based on killing free-living whales in order to profit from the sale of their flesh, oil or other products. Individual nations have made different decisions as to whether this industry should be allowed to exist. Should the decision be made on the basis of human interests alone? Originally, the opposition to whaling was based on the idea that the major species of whales, including the blue whale, humpback whale, southern right whale and possibly the sperm whale, were in grave danger of extinction. Hence the decision of the International Whaling Commission to impose a moratorium on whaling could have been justified in terms of long-term human interests. There was a great deal of discussion, at those meetings, of 'maximum sustainable yield', that is, of how to kill the most whales, without endangering the 'resource', that is, the very existence of the whales themselves. The Japanese whaling

industry then moved to hunting the smaller but more plentiful minke whale, which does not seem to be in any danger of extinction. But in more recent times, the discussion of whether whaling is an ethically defensible industry has gone beyond long-term human interests, and has begun to deal with the ethical question of whether whales should be killed at all, even when it is the interests of humans to do so. For simplicity, let us assume that none of the species of whales hunted is in danger of extinction. The issue therefore is one about whether, and to what extent, we consider the interests of individual nonhuman animals. So immediately we reach a fundamental moral disagreement: a disagreement about what kinds of beings ought to be considered in our moral deliberations. Many people think that once we reach a disagreement of this kind, argument must cease. I am more optimistic about the scope of rational argument in ethics. In ethics, even at a fundamental level, there are arguments that should convince any rational person.

Let us take a parallel example. This is not the first time in human history that members of one group have placed themselves inside a circle of beings who are entitled to moral consideration, while excluding another group of beings, like themselves in important respects, from this hallowed circle of protection. In ancient Greece, those they called 'barbarians' were thought of as 'living instruments' – that is, human beings who were not of intrinsic value, but existed in order to serve some higher end. That end was the welfare of their Greek captors or owners. To overcome this view required a shift in our ethics that has important similarities with the shift that would take us from our present speciesist view of animals to a non-speciesist view. Just as in the debate over equal consideration for nonhuman animals, so too in the debate over equal consideration for non-Greeks, one can imagine people saying that such fundamental differences of ethical outlook were not open to rational argument. Yet now, with the benefit of hindsight, we can see that in the case of the institution of slavery in ancient Greece, that would not have been correct.

Notoriously, one of the greatest of Greek philosophers justified the view that slaves are 'living instruments' by arguing that barbarians were less rational than Greeks. In the hierarchy of nature, Aristotle said, the purpose of the less rational is to serve the more rational. Hence it follows that non-Greeks exist in order to serve Greeks.[6]

No one now accepts Aristotle's defence of slavery. We reject it for a variety of reasons. We would reject his assumption that non-Greeks are less rational than Greeks, although given the cultural achievements

of the different groups at the time, that was by no means an absurd assumption to make. But more importantly, from the moral point of view, we reject the idea that the less rational exist in order to serve the more rational. Instead we hold that all humans are equal. We regard racism, and slavery based on racism, as wrong because they fail to give equal consideration to the interests of all human beings. This would be true whatever the level of rationality or civilization of the slave, and therefore Aristotle's appeal to the higher rationality of the Greeks would not have justified the enslavement of non-Greeks, even if it had been true. Members of the 'barbarian' tribes can feel pain, as Greeks can; they can be joyful or miserable, as Greeks can; they can suffer from separation from their families and friends, as Greeks can. To brush aside these needs so that Greeks could satisfy much more minor needs of their own was a great wrong and a blot on Greek civilization. This is something that we would expect all reasonable people to accept, as long as they can view the question from an impartial perspective, and are not improperly influenced by having a personal interest in the continued existence of slavery.

Now let us return to the question of the moral status of nonhuman animals. In keeping with the dominant Western tradition, many people still hold that all the nonhuman natural world has value only or predominantly in so far as it benefits human beings. A powerful objection to the dominant Western tradition turns against this tradition an extended version of the objection just made against Aristotle's justification of slavery. Nonhuman animals are also capable of feeling pain, as humans are; they can certainly be miserable, and perhaps in some cases their lives could also be described as joyful; and members of many mammalian species can suffer from separation from their family group. Is it not therefore a blot on human civilization that we brush aside these needs of nonhuman animals so as to satisfy minor needs of our own?

It might be said that the morally relevant differences between humans and other species are greater than the differences between different races of human beings. Here, by 'morally relevant differences' people will have in mind such things as the ability to reason, to be self-aware, to act autonomously, to plan for the future, and so on. It is no doubt true that, on average, there is a marked difference between our species and other species in regard to these capacities. But this does not hold in all cases. Dogs, horses, pigs and other mammals are better able to reason than newborn human infants, or humans with profound intellectual disabilities. Yet we bestow basic human rights on all human beings, and deny them to all nonhuman animals. In the case of human beings we

can see that pain is pain, and the extent to which it is intrinsically bad depends on factors like its duration and intensity, not on the intellectual abilities of the being who experiences it. We should be able to see that the same is true if the being suffering the pain is not of our species. There is no justifiable basis for drawing the boundary of intrinsic value around our own species. If we are prepared to defend practices based on disregarding the interests of members of other species because they are not members of our own group, how are we to object to those who wish to disregard the interests of members of other races because they are also not members of our own group?

The argument I have just offered shows that while the dominant Western tradition is wrong on the substantive issue of how we ought to regard non-human animals, this same tradition has within it the tools – in its recognition of the role of reason and argument – for constructing an extended ethics that reaches beyond the species boundary and addresses the human/animal relationship. There is no objection of principle to this extension. The principle that must apply is that of equal consideration of interests. The remaining difficulties are about exactly how this principle is to be applied to beings with lives – both mental and physical – that are very different to our own.

Is a non-speciesist ethic also hostile to humanism?

I have argued that a non-speciesist ethic stands firmly within the broad framework of the Western ethical tradition, even though it extends the content of that tradition beyond all previous bounds. Some critics, among them the French philosopher Luc Ferry, claim that both the ethic of animal liberation, and the ethic of deep ecology, are hostile to the best elements of Western ethics, and in particular to the humanist ideals of the enlightenment.[7] It is worth examining this criticism, both for its own sake and because it helps us to draw distinctions between humanism, animal liberation, and deep ecology.

Ferry begins by setting out a familiar tripartite distinction in the ways in which people view nature. The first is human-centred, denying intrinsic value to anything outside our own species. The second, which he correctly identifies as my own position, regards all sentient beings as entitled to equal consideration of interests. The third, the stance of the deep ecologists, grants moral status to all of nature, including ecological systems as a whole.

In broad terms, this categorization is acceptable. But it misleads Ferry into thinking of the animal liberation movement and the deep ecology

movement as being on the same continuum of thought. Of course, as we have already noted, both the animal liberation movement and deep ecologists challenge the idea that only human beings are of ethical significance. But for Ferry, the deep ecology movement represents much more than this. He finds in it links with the German Romantic movement and even with Nazi views of our relationship with nature. Ferry sees such viewpoints as indefensible, and also as dangerous, because they are a radical departure from the traditions of humanist civilization, which he sees as represented by the great declarations of the rights of human beings.

Whatever one may think of Ferry's critique of the deep ecology movement – and it is certainly open to serious objections – he is wrong to present the animal liberation movement as closer to deep ecology than it is to the enlightenment tradition that he himself supports. As we have just seen, the animal liberation movement is in fact an extension and culmination of the very enlightenment ideas of equality that Ferry so strongly champions. Consider what Ferry himself says about the enlightenment tradition. He says that the French declaration of rights of 1789 marks a break with earlier conceptions of law, which were rooted either in the natural order, as in ancient Greece and Rome, or in a theological world view, as in mediaeval Europe.[8] Ferry contrasts the abstract and universal humanism of 1789 with the counter-revolutionary Romantic tradition, which sees our moral obligations to others as dependent on their membership of a particular ethnic, national, cultural or religious community.

It is, however, precisely the abstract universalism of the enlightenment, not the Romantic tradition, which is the basis of the animal liberation movement. Indeed, of all the historical texts quoted by modern animal liberationists – myself included – the one most often referred to is a celebrated footnote from the *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* of the great enlightenment thinker, Jeremy Bentham, in which Bentham specifically refers to the fact that the French have discovered that 'the blackness of the skin is no reason why a human being should be abandoned without redress to the caprice of a tormentor' and goes on to look forward to the day when the number of the legs, or similar anatomical differences between humans and other animals, will be recognized as 'reasons equally insufficient for abandoning a sensitive being to the same fate'.[9] Here we have, in essence, the philosophy of animal liberation, and it is clearly a universalizing, enlightenment idea.

The theories of twentieth-century ethicists often point in the same direction. R.M. Hare has argued that if we want our judgments to count as ethical judgments, they must be universalizable in form.[10] By this he means that they must not contain proper names, personal pronouns, or similar individual references. One test of whether we are prepared to universalize our judgments is to ask whether we would accept them if we had to live the lives of all of those affected by them – both those who lose, and those who gain. This idea is a version of the Golden Rule – do unto others as you would have them do unto you – which has an honoured place in the Western tradition, as it does in several other traditions. Hare himself has accepted that his notion of universalizability applies to all sentient beings.[11] The difficulties in putting yourself in the position of a nonhuman animal affected by your actions are scarcely greater than in putting yourself in the position of human infants, or other humans whose lives and ways of thinking and feeling are very different from our own. A non-speciesist ethic is therefore an extension of a humanist ethic, rather than something that has developed from a different direction altogether.

Rights and utility

In the last page or two I have referred more than once to declarations of rights for human beings, or to the fact that we bestow basic rights on human beings but not animals. Acceptance of the idea of 'human rights', combined with a rejection of speciesism, seems to lead directly to the idea of 'animal rights'. In what way, then, does the utilitarian position defended here differ from that of defenders of rights for animals, such as Tom Regan?[12]

Utilitarians do not take rights as fundamental in ethics, but they can support declarations of rights, for human beings or for animals. They can regard such declarations or claims to rights as themselves based on utilitarian considerations. For example, it is plausible to believe that governments are often biased in their perception of what the public good requires, and come to see actions that are in their own interests as being in the public interest. Hence they may do terrible things to individuals, claiming that these are justified by the public good, when in fact they are only in the interests of the government or the people whose interests are served by it. For this reason, a society that recognizes certain basic rights as inviolable may better serve the interests of all its members than a society in which governments are able to do whatever *they* judge will best serve the interests of the whole society. Here we

have a justification for basic rights, but one that is founded squarely on utilitarian considerations. A similar argument may lead to recognition of animal rights, for here human beings as a whole may be liable to deceive themselves into thinking that a course of action is in the best interests of all sentient beings when in fact it is in the interests of human beings alone. But precisely what rights this argument would justify bestowing on animals is a large question, too large to attempt to answer here.

The meanings of 'humanism'

Before leaving the topic of 'humanism', it needs to be said that it is a term with many meanings. While Ferry criticizes me for allegedly turning away from humanism, I have often been attacked by conservative Christian opponents of abortion and euthanasia, as a 'secular humanist'. In the eyes of such people, secular humanism is a philosophy which holds that our ethical rules or principles come from human beings, and hence denies that they come from God. I am happy to be called a secular humanist in this sense. Since I do not believe in the existence of God, I cannot think of ethics as a system of divine commands. I do not think that all ethics is necessarily *human* in origin, since some nonhuman animals are capable of something akin to ethical behaviour. So ethics may be the product of social mammals, rather than humans specifically. Nevertheless, I readily grant that *our* systems of ethics are human conceptions or the products of human reasoning.

There are some who try to leap from the true statement that our systems of ethics are human conceptions, to the conclusion that is impossible, or meaningless, for such a morality to give rise to obligations on us in respect of nonhuman animals. But this is a blatant fallacy. One might as well argue that since our system of ethics is the product of human beings who are more than two years old, it is impossible, or meaningless, for such a morality to give rise to obligations on us in respect of infants. The fact that our systems of morality are the conceptions of human beings with post-infant capacities tells us nothing about who or what can be the *subject* of our morality.

One more form of 'humanism' needs to be mentioned. Historically, humanism can be traced to the Renaissance thinkers who rejected Christian teachings about the weakness and depravity of human beings. Instead they made man 'the measure of all things', and the centre of the 'great chain of being' that stretched from the beasts below to the angels above. We might call this 'anthropocentric humanism'.

Anthropocentric humanism emphasizes the ways in which humans are distinct from animals. Hence although this line of thought was formed in opposition to medieval Christianity, in a more fundamental sense it is a continuation of the Christian view that human beings are special because we alone are made in the image of God and have an immortal soul. This convergence of anthropocentric humanism and Christianity is clearly apparent in the thought of Descartes, who argued that nonhuman animals are merely automata, incapable of suffering. Descartes' view was not widely accepted because it defies common sense to believe that animals are mere machines, and that their cries and howls when they appear to be suffering are really more like the ticking of a clock than like our own expressions of pain. Immanuel Kant's philosophical defence of anthropocentric humanism was less extreme, and for that reason in the long run more influential. Kant linked the concept of moral worth to the possession of reason and autonomy, which animals do not possess. Accordingly Kant treats human beings as 'ends in themselves', but nonhuman animals as merely a means to human ends. As such, in his view, we have no direct duties to them.

Anthropocentric humanism is unsound, both ethically and scientifically. It is time to move beyond anthropocentric humanism to an ethic based on a broad and compassionate concern for the suffering of others, and a rejection of all religious or ideological fanaticism. (I acknowledge that there are fanatics among animal liberationists, as there are in any large movement, and they get a disproportionate share of media attention. They are, however, a tiny minority within the movement, and not an authentic representation of its philosophy.)

Does non-speciesism go far enough?

In many contexts, a non-speciesist ethic is so revolutionary that the question of whether it goes far enough is unlikely to arise. A non-speciesist ethic can, as we have seen, be defended by placing it within the broad framework of the Western tradition, and more specifically as derived from the humanism of the enlightenment. Some would see that tradition as precisely the problem. They argue that it is enlightenment humanism that is responsible for a civilization that has, for the first time in history, changed the climate of our planet, put a hole into the ozone layer, and made species extinct at an unprecedented rate. It could also be argued that oriental traditions such as Confucianism and Taoism promote a more sympathetic view of environmental ethics.[13]

From a historical perspective, this is probably correct. For the environment, it would almost certainly have been better if the Western tradition had not become so dominant. But now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, we need to look forward, not backwards. The real issue is what approach offers the best chance of getting us out of the mess we are in. Ironically, the environmental crisis is so grave that we can use quite a conventional Western ethic to argue for a radically different attitude to the environment. In many respects, even a traditional ethic limited to human beings would suffice. One could, entirely within the limits of the dominant Western tradition, oppose the mining of uranium on the grounds that nuclear fuel, whether in bombs or power stations, is so hazardous to human life that the uranium is better left in the ground. Similarly, many arguments against pollution, the use of gases harmful to the ozone layer, the burning of fossil fuels, and the destruction of forests, could be couched in terms of the harm to human health and welfare from the pollutants, or the changes to the climate that may occur as a result of the use of fossil fuels and the loss of forest. The fate of peasant farmers on low-lying lands in the delta regions of Bangladesh and Egypt may depend on whether citizens of the wealthy nations curb our greenhouse gas emissions. Even allowing for some uncertainty about the link between these gases and global warming, the imbalance in the interests at stake (on the one hand, the survival of 40 million people, on the other, such changes as restrictions on the use of private vehicles, or cutting our consumption of animal products produced by modern energy-intensive farming methods) is so great that there can be no doubt about the ethical course to take.

On other environmental issues, arguments about what is best for human beings can be supplemented by the introduction of consideration for the interests of nonhuman animals. Obviously, even if there are some benefits for humans in the hunting and killing of whales, the interests of the whales themselves must be taken into account as well. They are sentient beings, they must suffer pain when they are harpooned, and they are also social animals, so it seems likely that there is a sense of loss among others in the group when one of their number is killed. Arguably, they also have an interest in continued life, although there are many different possible ways of understanding what this interest is. It could be seen in terms of the loss of well-being caused by the death of a whale who was leading a contented life in her or his natural habitat. Or, if we believe that whales are beings with some degree of self-awareness and capacity to see themselves as existing over time, it may be that they are even capable of having direct preferences

for the future which are thwarted when they are killed. In either case, it is clear that treating the interests of whales as having intrinsic value drastically changes the nature of the debate about the justifiability of whaling.

A different example of the way in which we can appeal to the interests of animals to protect the environment is the issue of the preservation of old-growth forests. Against the claim that cutting the forests down creates jobs and keeps small logging towns alive, one could argue in terms of the economic benefits of ecotourism, of the importance of forests for the preservation of our climate and the quality of our water supply, and of the loss to all future generations if they are unable to walk in an untouched forest. But this argument is strengthened by the recognition that forests are homes to millions of animals, who will die from starvation and stress when the tress are felled. The suffering and death of these wild animals makes the clearing of the forests even worse than it would be if no sentient beings depended on them.

I see it as an advantage of these arguments that they are recognizable as being derived from the Western tradition. Like it or not, whether we come from the United States or India, from Russia or Japan, the Western way of thinking is enormously influential. I doubt that, even in China or Japan, the Confucian or Taoist traditions have enough strength to compete in the mainstream of social thinking. Instead, these traditions struggle to preserve some by-ways of life in which they can still have an impact, for example among people concerned with living a spiritual or ethical life. But they do not influence the leaders of governments, or of the big corporations that make the economic decisions that determine our future. By working within the Western tradition we connect better with the way people think, and have a better chance of influencing the societies in which we live.

Notes

1. *Animal Liberation*, New York Review of Books, New York, 2nd edition, 1991.
2. See Jeremy Bentham, *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, Hafner, New York, 1948, ch. XVII, sec. 1, par iv, p. 311; John Stuart Mill, 'Whewell on Moral Philosophy', reprinted in T. Regan and P. Singer (eds), *Animal Rights and Human Obligations*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ., 1976, pp. 131–2; Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, Macmillan, London, 7th ed., 1907, Bk IV, ch. 1, p. 414.
3. *The Case for Animal Rights*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1983.
4. See, for example, Marti Kheel, 'The Liberation of Nature: A Circular Affair', *Environmental Ethics*, 7: 2 (1985), pp. 135–49.
5. *Genesis*, I, 24–8.

6. Aristotle, *Politics*, J.M. Dent & Sons, London, 1916, p. 16.
7. Luc Ferry, *Le Nouvel Ordre Écologique* (Grasset, Paris, 1992); translated as *The New Ecological Order*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago (tr. Carol Volk), 1995.
8. *Ibid., Le Nouvel Ordre Écologique*, p. 251.
9. Jeremy Bentham, *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation, op. cit.*, ch. 17.
10. R.M. Hare, *Moral Thinking*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1981.
11. R.M. Hare, 'Why I am Only a Semi-Vegetarian', in R.M. Hare, *Essays in Bioethics*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1993, pp. 219–35.
12. See his *The Case for Animal Rights*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1983.
13. Among those who have defended this view is the Japanese philosopher T. Yamauchi, who in an unpublished paper entitled 'Towards Unity among Environmental Values: bridging a gap between East and West' has argued that there are affinities between the views of Western deep ecologists, and Confucianism and Taoism.

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