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‘Having accepted the principle of equality as a sound moral basis for relations with others of our own species, we are also committed to accepting it as a sound moral basis for relations with those outside our own species, the non-human animals.’

The Introduction

In his *Practical Ethics*, Peter Singer is proposing a viewpoint which is often thought of as crazy by some, and simultaneously cherished by others – that animals have the same moral value as humans. This is highly controversial in today’s society, especially since a new wave of animal-rights activists has emerged in the last few decades, but that idea is not just a modern phenomenon, but rather an ethics practiced in some cultures throughout history. Therefore, I will firstly analyze Peter Singer’s quote and see what its implications truly are, and then I will show how this belief doesn’t stand true in its entirety, but how we can take something from it.

The problem of uniqueness

The quote starts off by the supposition that everyone is currently accepting the fact that we, as humans, are equal, and therefore have to conduct our behavior by that principle. Singer calls it a “sound” moral basis, and the word “sound” contains many implications in it. For instance, saying that something is “sound” doesn’t really appear too convincing or self-confident. Another term which could be used instead of it is “safe”. All of that means that, apparently, it is the best we have got. Of course, it is hard to argue against the fact that we all do in fact share the same experiences, emotions, faiths, and universal human truths, but what I am aiming at with this is the second part of the quote. A logical problem arises from applying a “sound moral basis” that works for humans on other species apart from us – animals. Singer in fact says that we are committed to apply the same principles to animals, simply by agreeing with the first part. For example, we



would never kill a man to eat him, so we shouldn't eat animals as well. But we obviously eat animals, wear leather, etc. To completely understand what he really means, we need to see how exactly he looks at animals compared to humans. It is obvious from miles away that he refers to those outside our species as "non-human animals". So, if there are non-human animals, that would mean that human animals exist as well, and here is where the core of the problem is. Humans are considered equal to animals, because of the fact that we are animals ourselves. Simple enough. This is a pure scientific statement that, although accepting the fact that we have a consciousness, says we merely evolved to be this way; to think, make art, build pyramids and do extraordinary things. Unfortunately, that uniqueness of human kind is stripped away, and leaves us with a pessimistic view of ourselves: there is no god, there is no purpose, all life emerged from a few cells by random chemical reactions, and so on. The scientific paradigms destroy all the illusions about our being we had held for centuries. It can be rather depressing and pessimistic to see life that way, especially for religious or spiritual people, but I believe that even if we accept that notion, it doesn't take away from our uniqueness. That is why we need to shift our focus from the causes of human life and the universe in general, and look at what exactly hides in our being, our intrinsic qualities that define us, and lastly, separate us from "real" animals. This is the starting point from which I will base my arguments and structure my thoughts around: that the fact that we consider other humans as equals doesn't necessitate the exact same conduct towards other species.

The Human Triumph

Now I will prove how humans are in fact different from the rest of the animal kingdom, even if accepting the scientific paradigm. Let's postulate that we are in fact just another species which evolved from the same ancestor as well as any other species. Even in the tale of evolution, we can more-or-less pinpoint the moment at which humans separated themselves from other species. For example, a trait characteristic only to humans is art, and the first known form of art is cave drawings. From then, humanity has constantly improved itself, and it still is to this day: from fire to the invention of the wheel, from operas to mobile phones. But, in fact, all of that actually means nothing compared to the worth the ideas alone behind them have, the fact that we are able to ponder hard philosophical questions, even this one right now, and continuously strive towards improving ourselves. We can even wonder if ants ask themselves the same questions: Why are we here? What is the point to life? But, we can only look from our own perspectives and see that what makes us different is free will. "Humans are condemned to be free", Sartre said. Animals always do what is natural to them, what is woven in their biology and are driven by animalistic principles such as the need to survive, to eat or be eaten, to mate and reproduce. A lion is never guilty for brutally killing an antelope, nor does he feel bad about it afterwards. Humans are on the



other hand the exact opposite. Due to our free will and its inevitability, we are constantly forced to make decisions, thus dealing with moral questions. That is because we don't really know what our true nature is, and what a human should act like. We know everything about animal behavior and we can simply find out about it from high-school textbooks, but we have written philosophy books for ages and we still don't know the answer. Yes, we can follow moral principles, maxims and religious books, but we have continuously seen how fluid morality is, and thus abstract. In simpler terms, to kill a human as another human poses a moral question solely for the reason we have the ability to choose, we are not bound by regular laws of nature – we can overcome them. Animals don't bother themselves with questions on what is good or bad or write essays about it. Humans have been on the both sides of the coin: humans killed each other in concentration camps and humans also helped others and loved them with an enormous heart. So, by seeing that we are free and have the capacity to act out moral decisions (and often either feel good or disgusted by them) is the one true reason why we differentiate from other species, not pyramids, symphonies and Starbucks. A man is another man's man, and that can be even worse than a wolf.

The sublime status of human existence

We should at this point return to the beginning of the essay and dive deeper into the first part of the quote, and that is the notion of the principle of equality as a sound moral basis for relations with others of our own species. It is almost undisputable that all humans are equal in their essence, in what makes them human, not animals, and I defined it as free will. Basing our equality on free will means recognizing every one of our human species has the same capacity as us, and thus also being able to do moral acts. Furthermore, that is why we empathize with other people who found themselves in the same position as us or to anyone in general, since we understand each other as beings who can think, feel, suffer and be happy as a result of our actions. In a nutshell, we are comparing ourselves to other humans by the quality only we – as humans – possess, so to compare us to animals by the same parameters is ridiculous. We should instead put humans and animals in the position of ones who do moral actions (humans), and objects of those mentioned actions (animals). Since the beginning of our time, religion and other forms of ethical systems defined our relationship with animals. For example, in the Book of Genesis from the Old Testament, God gave Adam the job of naming for all of the animals and taking care of them. But, he also says animals are subordinate to Adam. That is perhaps the way many people have perceived animals throughout ages and still to this day. If we then look at the “sublime status of human existence”, the name with which I titled this section, we can understand the most brutal and outrageous human act towards animals – eating them. What I meant by the term “sublime status” is exactly the first point Singer mentioned in the quote: “the principle



of equality as a moral basis towards humans". If we accept this – and we already constituted that we have – then we have to treat humans better first, and animals only after the first condition has been satisfied. To make things clearer, we need a practical example to better understand the point. One of the main problems in today's world is hunger. It has unfortunately been around since the beginnings of time, but people today are still focusing on other problem besides it. I will now show how the act of killing and then eating animals is moral for the sake of preserving the dignity of human kind and saving people dying of starvation. The demonstrate this, I will use one of Peter Singer's own arguments. Regarding the problem of starvation in Africa, Singer said that everyone who doesn't donate money to social funds and charity programs is basically immoral. That may sound harsh at first, but his point is that everyone who has a stable income of finances should donate at least a small amount of money to those charities in order to help starving children, and if everybody would do it, the problem would soon be solved. The same logic can be applied to eating meat in order to avoid dying of hunger and allowing it, and the central theme of this argument is that humans ought to be helped out from unfair conditions by any means possible. And why? Because we are equal. So, the main point is that a human life is more valuable than that of an animal, derived from the fact that all humans are equal, and that we conduct our behavior in a way to help each other. Another instance is Eskimo people whose survival depends on hunting whales, but a lot of people revolted against that, calling it inhumane. Similarly, the lives of Asian merchants who catch crabs to sell them and make a living also proves this point. In all cases, the value of human life must be prioritized, just like the modern, democratic understanding teaches us. That way, we solve a number of different moral dilemmas regarding animal life. We can pose a thought experiment to exemplify this: should thousands of animals be brutally and inhumanely tested and experimented on in order to find a cure for cancer? Again, if we apply this type of Machiavellian logic that the goal justifies the means in which it's achieved, then the answer is yes. We should consider the long-term consequences of such an action; if a small amount of animals should suffer to save millions of humans and ultimately remove the need to experiment on animals in general, it should be done. A common counterargument to this is that all beings with the ability to suffer should be treated equally, but can we really ignore the suffering of humans which can be solved by the suffering of animals? On the contrary, animal suffering would stop if humans weren't using them as means (and meals!). But in reality, how much more does a sheep suffer from a human than from a wolf? Maybe that is the part of our animal nature we must accept; that and the preservation of one's species. When comparing humans to animals, a utilitarian approach is inevitable, especially taking the humanitarian road in helping everyone. The only problem is that animals (since they don't have a conscious mind) can't sacrifice themselves for the sake of humanity like the figure of Jesus Christ did, so animal-rights activists take that as the main reason for protecting the rights of animals.



The real immorality

It would be quite ignorant to disregard the entirety of Singer's statement, so in this part of the essay, I attempt to show how his principle can be applied to some instances of true unfair treatment of animals. In the previous section, I quickly mentioned how experimenting on animals may become unneeded once we satisfy all of our human needs. That is a logical conclusion based on what I said, even more obvious while looking at examples like finding a cure for cancer or untreatable diseases. The problem of such diseases is huge, and many would agree that it must be solved, but once we fulfill all of our needs for saving the human life, that is it, and experimenting on animals is the thing of the past. The real problem and the "immorality", as I called it, is using animals as a means to goals we don't really need. Need is the key word in this section. For instance, the cosmetic industry and their testing on animals simply to sell products people don't need to survive, like they do food and cures for diseases which I mentioned. The reason that testing cosmetic products on rabbits is immoral is because things like cosmetics are not detrimental, and just turn into hedonism, the disease of the consumeristic societies. The other thing on which Singer's concept can be applied to is aggressive behavior towards animals, sadism if one could call it. If a person is beating a dog, or torturing animals for fun and pure enjoyment, we ask ourselves what is exactly happening in the mind of that individual. This type of behavior is indicative of something deep and dark about one's mind, and it can sometimes tell us a lot about how that person treats other people. That kind of behavior can be a manifestation of terrible social conduct, and the product of poor upbringing and the lack of empathy. There is a great old saying which goes something like this: "Someone who doesn't love animals, cannot love humans." It appears then that we, as sentient beings who have the ability to freely interact with the world, have the duty to stay as humane as possible in every aspect of our life, since it tells a lot about who we truly are as a part of the human race – how we treat each other.

The conclusion

To sum up, in this essay I attempted to deconstruct a quote by Peter Singer on the topic of treating animals the same way we treat other humans, and I started off by looking at the meaning behind the quote and then analyzing its implications. Furthermore, I explained what differentiates humans from the rest of animals, and that it is exactly the reason we think of humans as equal, so applying that concept on animals doesn't work. Then I justified some controversial moral dilemmas about animals, looking at them from a position that the human life is worth more, simply by accepting we are equal, and that we must prioritize saving all of humans in unfavorable positions first. On



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the other hand, I pointed out the fact that immoral or unjust treatment of animals can in fact exist, so we must remain as humane as possible in every one of our actions towards other forms of life, but still, always put the care for our brothers and sisters at the top of the list. Only by staying humane to other humans and helping them as much as possible, even if it means the sacrifice of animals, we can hope for a brighter future for all, including animals.