

Articles

PETER SINGER, "ANIMALS AND THE VALUE OF LIFE" IN MATTERS OF LIFE AND DEATH, NEW INTRODUCTORY ESSAYS IN MORAL PHILOSOPHY (NY: RANDOM HOUSE, INC. 1980).

In this essay, Singer attempts to determine one thing: the value of life. Based on this determination, one can conclude what kinds of beings have rights, and the kinds of rights they have. Singer poses a preliminary question: Is human life more valuable than nonhuman life? Singer claims that it is common for people to consider human beings more valuable than non-human beings. But why is this so? Is it because humans have capacities greater than those of nonhumans?

It has been shown that chimpanzees, and other mammals and birds, are self-conscious, meaning that they are able to reflect upon themselves as existing in time, and plan for the future, no matter how little advance in the future they are planning. Singer notes that these animals have the same kind of capacities as human animals, and some nonhuman animals even have some capabilities which some humans do not have. Hence, Singer claims that some nonhuman animals are 'persons'. This is an interesting and unique concept. Generally, one tends to think of humans as the only kind of animals who can be persons, and oftentimes, people interchange the terms 'human' and 'person'. But Singer stresses the importance of this distinction and bases his argument for animal rights, and particularly in defense of vegetarianism, on this claim.

Both preference utilitarianism and Tooley's argumentative view of rights¹ stress the importance of being a person (that is, being aware of oneself as existing over time). Hence, there is no reason to assume that these rights belong only to humans. Thus, the replaceability principle, the principle which states that the benefits gained by one animal cancel out the loss they inflict on another animal is not applicable here.² But Singer notes that this does not resolve at least one problem: the position in which mentally deficient human beings find themselves.

While Singer's article concerns only the issue of killing animals and not the issue of suffering, he is aware of this. And although he includes in his essay arguments concerning utilitarianism, and though he briefly mentions the 'dominion theory'³, he gives specific attention to arguments concerning 'intrinsic value'. Because of this Singer fails adequately to discuss the problems inherent within utilitarianism; nor does he resolve the problems within Tooley's argument. Without an adequate view of the status of human beings who are comatose or mentally deficient, there

remains a gap in the argument for animal rights. For we must be able to know what kinds of rights all animals deserve in order to give certain other groups any status. This problem, not a new one, is considered to be indeterminable by many theorists, especially writers on abortion.

Despite the limitations of Singer's argument, his view is interesting and worthy of consideration. As an essay in an anthology, his position is thorough and revelatory especially to those whom are not familiar with the subject-matter. His distinction between 'human' and 'person' is interesting and controversial. Whether or not it is accurate remains to be seen.

¹cf. Tooley, Michael. "A Defense of Abortion and Infanticide" in The Problem of Abortion, ed. by Joel Feinberg (CA: Wadsworth, 1973).

²Singer, Peter. "Animals and the Value of Life"; see p. 249-251.

³Ibid.; see p. 228-231. This is the theory which states that God gave human beings dominion over other animals, for their own purposes.

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