I am probably the wrong person to reply to Frey’s paper. Although we certainly have our differences on issues such as the ethics of eating meat, on this particular topic we are in agreement on a range of the most important matters. This is because Frey’s paper is an attack on the claim that it is as wrong to take the life of a nonhuman animal as it is to take the life of a human being; whereas the position I take in *Animal Liberation*, which leads me to my views on vegetarianism, animal experimentation, and other issues concerning the treatment of animals, is based on the argument that it is wrong to give less consideration to the suffering of an animal than we would give to the similar suffering of a human being.¹

I am pleased to see that Frey now accepts this fundamental moral claim. He acknowledges that suffering is suffering, whether the being is autonomous or not. He also joins me in rejecting speciesism — the view that the wrongness of inflicting pain — or, for that matter, of taking a life — varies according to the species of a being, considered in itself and not merely as a pointer to other qualities or characteristics that the being is likely to have.

In turn, I certainly agree with Frey that the value of a life may differ according to the nature of the being living that life. Together with my colleague Helga Kuhse, I have written a book arguing for the view that the significance of killing a human being can vary according to the capacities of that being.² So far as the comparative value of human and nonhuman life is concerned, my critical fire has been directed against those who hold that all human lives are more valuable than any nonhuman lives. This is the traditional doctrine of the “sanctity of human life,” widely held by those who object to any form of abortion or euthanasia. I reject it because it is obvious that in respect of any morally significant characteristics, such as autonomy, rationality, self-awareness, capacity to have long-term future preferences, ability to use language, or whatever, some humans rank well below many nonhuman animals. I am thinking here, of course, of infants and...
severely retarded humans — the so-called "marginal cases." Frey is not vulnerable to the argument from marginal cases because he does not take the view that these non-autonomous humans have a life which is more valuable than the lives of similar non-autonomous animals. He says, for instance, that if it is permissible to use animals as sources for spare parts to be transplanted to autonomous human beings who would otherwise die, it must also be permissible to use, as sources for spare parts, human beings at a similar mental level to the animals. Thus, Frey's position is not speciesist.

Then do Frey and I differ at all? We do, because although we may roughly agree on which human lives are more valuable than the lives of other humans or of some nonhuman animals, we do not agree on what makes these lives more valuable. Frey sees the key as being autonomy — the strong form of autonomy he refers to by the expression "autonomy as control." On the other hand, I see the crucial factor as being the capacity to understand that one has a future, and to have desires or preferences for that future.

Normally a being who is autonomous in Frey's sense will also have the capacity to have preferences for the future; hence the practical equivalence of our views. But in order to test the difference between them, let us try to imagine someone who lacks autonomy in Frey's sense but does have preferences for the future. Consider a person who completely lacks autonomy and simply watches his/her life go by, much as we view a movie. Just as we are powerless to control what happens in the movie, so this person is powerless to control the direction of his/her life; yet just as we may have very strong preferences about what will happen to the characters in the movie, so this person may have very strong preferences about what will happen to him/her. Is it worse to kill such a person — contrary to his/her strong preference for continued life — than it would be to kill a being who has no conception of a future at all? I think it would be, and if I am right, one plausible explanation would be that it is not the presence of autonomy, nor the capacity to control one's own life, which makes killing especially wrong but the thwarting of preferences which takes place when those with desires for the future are killed despite their desires for future life or for goals which can only be achieved by future life.

On my view, then, it is especially wrong to kill beings who can grasp the fact that they exist over time and may have a future. What follows from such a view? Frey has pointed out that when, in Practical Ethics, I listed some animals which may have such a self-concept, the only significant food animal I included was the pig. But the list was not intended to be exhaustive, and one might well include cattle as well. I claim no special expertise on this matter. Certainly, however, I am prepared to grant that some food animals are probably not capable of seeing themselves as having a future — it would be difficult to argue that fish have this capacity, and only a little less difficult to argue that chickens have it.

Even if we did decide that only pigs, among all the food animals, might qualify for having the necessary self-concept, we should still beware of the inference Frey appears to make when he suggests that this can relieve our worries about the use we make of, and the treatment we mete out to, animals. For, as I have already said, my case against eating meat is based not on the deaths of the animals but on their lives. That is why, in Animal Liberation, I devoted a long chapter to farming practices, detailing especially the confinement of animals in modern factory farms, but recounting also the many cruelties involved in traditional farming methods. Perhaps a few of us living in rural areas could ensure that we eat only animals without desires for the future, who have led pleasant lives free from the exploitation which appears to be inherent in any commercial system of farming. But for us city folk, forced to rely on the supermarket for our food, there is no such possibility. That is why, if we consider the sufferings of animals and do not discount this suffering because those who suffer are not human beings, we should be vegetarians. This conclusion stands irrespective of any arguments about the value of animal life and the wrongness of killing animals.

Notes

4Animal Liberation, Chapter 3.