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**Postgraduate/Distance Learning
Assignment Coversheet & Feedback Form**

For completion by the student:

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Module tutor: DR REBEKAH HUMPHREYS

Assignment title: Do we bear moral responsibility primarily to individual animals (human animals included) or to species?

Assignment due date: 10 SEPTEMBER 2021

I confirm that this is my original work and that I have adhered to the University policy on plagiarism.

Name: ZOE MAVRIDI

Assignment Mark

1 st Marker's Provisional mark	59
2 nd Marker's/Moderator's provisional mark	
External Examiner mark (if relevant)	
Final Mark	

NB. All marks are provisional until confirmed by the Final Examination Board

For completion by Marker 1:

Comments: This is a reasonable answer to the question set, & the essay contains plausible arguments. In places, the structure breaks down & the sections sometimes feel a bit disjointed from the actual essay Q. Try to link back to the Q more frequently. A greater degree of accuracy & precision is also sometimes needed. That said, you draw on a very wide range of texts & do a good job at incorporating so many

Marker 1 signature:

Date:

For completion by Marker 2 / Moderator:

Comments:

different ideas into the essay. For your next assignment, try to think about the structure & where you place claims & arguments. At present, there are tensions/contradictions in the presentation because the way in which claims have been explained (without being linked to counter-claims; counter-claims placed further on in the essay).

Marker 2 / Moderator signature:

Date:

External Examiner's comments (if relevant):

But, overall, this is a satisfactory piece of work that is ambitious in terms of the materials it draws on.

59.

RTA

External Examiner signature:

Date:

Do we bear moral responsibility primarily to individual animals (human animals included) or to species?

'A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community.

It is wrong when it tends otherwise.'

-Aldo Leopold

Introduction

In a 1967 paper, English philosopher Philippa Foot first came up with a moral dilemma, which would later become known as 'the trolley problem': There is a runaway trolley crashing down the railway tracks. On the tracks there are five people tied up and unable to move, as the trolley is heading straight towards them (Thomson, J., 1985). Nearby, there is a person standing next to a lever with two options: Do nothing and allow the trolley to kill the five people on the track or pull the lever and divert the trolley onto the side track where it would kill one person (Thomson, J., 1985). What is the right thing to do? In a similar light, would killing an individual (minority) to save a species (majority) be an ethical thing to do? Should our moral code give priority primarily to the survival of individual animals (human animals included) or to species?

The interests of individual non-human animals often clash with those of their own species as a whole. It is often thought that the ecological, biological or moral value of a species is higher than the interests of an individual animal, and in some cases, such as trophy hunting for example, older or weaker individuals are even purposefully destroyed in exchange for monetary benefit, which will, allegedly, be directed towards the conservation of the species by protecting the interests of younger individuals of breeding age. This practice follows the philosophical idea of utilitarianism, which states that 'the morally right action is the action that produces the most good' (Driver, 2014). It is worth noting here that this principle *is rarely applied* to human animals, as the same actions would be considered deeply unethical (and is, of course, against the law). This essay is going to look at whether we bear moral responsibility primarily to species or individuals but in order to do so, we first need to define what moral responsibility is, what the differences between the two categories are, why the interests of species are important, why we should also care about individual beings (equally or more), and last but not least, draw conclusions as to which party *deserves* our moral support more, and most importantly, why.

Do species have interests?

why? say why here.

Or... only humans are moral agents in the sense of having moral responsibility? Need not be.

Definition of moral responsibility

→ Moral responsibility is a man-made, anthropocentric concept, which applies mainly to human animals, and describes the status of deserving praise and reward or punishment and blame for one's actions. People are responsible for what they do, provided they have free will, in other words provided they act freely and are not physically or mentally forced to do so. Although it is highly unlikely that humans always act using free will and are not affected by external factors such as circumstances and past experiences, here moral responsibility will retain a meaning, which assumes action based upon free will, in order to discuss whether species and individuals are worthy of it (and how much so). Empirical evidence also suggests that a moral code might not be exclusive to humans, and animals such as rats, pigeons and primates have also been observed to behave morally and are 'sometimes willing to help others when there is no direct gain involved, or even a direct loss' (Monsó, 2018).

Species definition, characteristics and the Species Problem

✓ In biology, the term 'species' refers to related organisms 'that share common characteristics and are capable of interbreeding' (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2019). The discipline, which classifies species (living and extinct organisms) is called taxonomy (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2020). From a biological point of view, our understanding of species characteristics plays an important role in comprehending the nature of human and non-human animals, shaping environmental law and, ultimately, maintaining our planet's ecological balance. In order for humans to assign moral responsibility to species, we first need to understand what species are, not only in biology but other disciplines too. The term 'species' has significant philosophical weight and is often controversial. Do all members of a species have common essences? Should species be treated as a group of entities or individuals? There is no doubt that most Wildlife Conservation authorities approach non-human animal existence with an anthropocentric point of view and an emphasis on natural resource management, economics and political agendas rather than deontological ethics; animals are very often referred to as 'resources', 'endowments' or as objects of human 'proprietaryship' ultimately for the satisfaction of consumptive and non-consumptive human desires' (Kapembwa, 2017). The challenge is, however, how to assume moral responsibility towards a category of sentients, which appears to be disputed even amongst experts in the field: 'No term is more difficult to define than 'species,' and on no point are zoologists more divided than as to what should be understood by this word' (Nicholson, 1872). Is the term 'species' coined mainly to suit or even simplify our understanding of the animal kingdom without addressing the biological (sentient) needs of its individuals? British biologist J. B. S. Haldane observed that 'the concept of a species is a concession to our linguistic habits and neurological mechanisms' (Haldane, 1956) and in his *Cladistic classification as applied to vertebrates*, Professor Niels Bonde seemed to denounce the factual accuracy of the idea of 'species' altogether: 'An important aspect of any species

What's your new on this?

definition whether in neontology or palaeontology is that any statement that particular individuals (or fragmentary specimens) belong to a certain species is an hypothesis (not a fact)' (Bonde, 1977). Evolutionary biologist Jody Hey admitted that biologists have so far failed to agree on 'how we should identify species and how we should define the word 'species' (Hey, 2001) and Massimo Pigliucci outlined that even if we did define the term, pure empirical data would not offer all the answers: 'First, the species problem is not primarily an empirical one, but it is rather fraught with philosophical questions that require — but cannot be settled by — empirical evidence' (Pigliucci, 2003). *Interesting.*

Is killing non-human animals to protect the species justified? Environment and Ethics

If we were to analyse killing individual animals to protect the species, we should be looking at two main aspects of the argument; the environmental and the ethical. It is admittedly hard to engage in a conversation about intentional animal killing without looking at both sides with equal emphasis. Wildlife government bodies very often go to great lengths in order to protect species vital to the balance of their countries' ecosystem but do not hesitate to legislate mass culling when it comes to invasive species, which could harm native species or the environment. In the USA alone the Department of Wildlife Services 'is estimated to have killed around 40 million animals in the past 15 years' (Inglis, 2020).

However, how certain can one be that killing individuals actually protects the species now and long term? According to Panthera, an organisation devoted to the conservation of the world's 40 wild cat species, lions are 'extinct in 26 African countries, and experts estimate that there are only about 20,000 left in the wild' (Panthera, n.d.). Findings of a study published in the Journal of Ornithology 'contradicted the view that grey squirrels have caused declines in British bird numbers over the past 40 years' and 'do not have a significant impact on the populations of many of England's woodland bird species' (Walker, 2010).

many people being comfortable about...
Despite comfortably killing invasive non-human animals, we would most certainly hesitate to apply the same principle to human populations: 'This leads us to another parallel that is drawn between invasive species and immigrant humans (...) Just as immigrants are accused of taking local people's jobs, so invasive species are accused of out-competing native flora and fauna' (Inglis, 2020).

Killing non-human animals to protect the species – a utilitarian perspective

Despite the fact that there is legislation protecting the welfare of animals in a variety of contexts, we intentionally harm individuals on a daily basis in order to preserve the species. Examples include trophy hunting wild animals in South Africa, culling grey squirrels in the UK and Markhor hunting in Central Asia. An estimated 1.7 million wild animals were trophy hunted over the past decade - 'the equivalent of almost 500 animals a day, or one every 3 minutes' (Gonçalves, p. 18), in order to generate income for the local communities and improve genetics by killing older, non-breeding animals, who sometimes are also,



But this is not to protect species.

Is this right though?

But - there are
vested interests
at stake
(financial)
here not should
you should
be aware
of.

allegedly, aggressive towards other members of the herd. On its website, the British Association for Shooting & Conservation claims that grey squirrels 'can cause serious problems for foresters, native wildlife and gamekeepers', strip bark from tree trunks, take the eggs of songbirds and are 'a significant factor in the decline of the native red squirrel population in the UK' (BASC, 2021). Shooting a Markhor in Pakistan 'can cost upwards of \$150,000' and funds the creation of handicraft centres, water pipelines, community schools and other amenities (SCI, 2021) but could also prevent poaching. Deer populations, which have grown really large, are often culled (preferably as painlessly as possible), in order to prevent them from starving, when food sources are inadequate. The New Zealand government is currently funding Aerial 1080 poison 'to cull possum, stoat, rat and feral cat populations, which threaten to wipe out native bird species' (Brighten, 2019). In 2015, the Australian government announced a plan to cull 2 million feral cats by 2020 'to save native bird, lizard, snake and small mammal species from extinction' (Brighten, 2019) and in the 1950s, the UK authorities allowed myxomatosis 'to wipe out rabbits, which were seen as an agricultural pest' (Brighten, 2019). Even animal experimentation would probably fall into this category, since humans kill non-human individuals in laboratories for the (often debatable) benefit of the human race and very often for the benefit of other animals too, for example animal testing for animal medicines. This principle, however, is morally disconcerting and it is fairly obvious that its application on human lives would be both illegal and immoral; no one purposefully takes a healthy human life for the sole reason of saving others, no matter how many. English utilitarian philosopher John Stuart Mill defended the idea of non-killing in his Greatest Happiness Principle, according to which, 'the ultimate end is an existence exempt as far as possible from pain, and as rich as possible in enjoyments, both in point of quantity and quality (...) to the greatest extent possible, secured to all mankind and not to them only, but (...) to the whole sentient creation' (Schefczyk, n.d). Furthermore, in nature, there seems to be no redundant species member that needs to be removed by human hand, because every member seems to be playing a vital role in a herd, simply by existing: 'In advanced social mammals (e.g. elephants and whales), removing older individuals with usually higher trophy values may cause severe population declines due to the loss of social knowledge, which is necessary for survival' (Ghasemi, 2020).

okay.
But
why
is
human
life
considered
more
valuable
than
say
a
rat's
life?

Good. Use this to
counter-argue against
the above

Moral responsibility towards individuals – an animal rights perspective

Although animals are not moral agents and cannot be held responsible for their actions, proving that they have no moral worth would be a very challenging philosophical task. Their mere existence, sentience and capacity for suffering are all valid reasons not only for their survival, but also for a life worth living with enjoyment and free from pain. German philosopher Immanuel Kant spoke in favour of the theory of intrinsic value and defended the view that we 'should not treat other (human) beings as means for other purposes but as ends in themselves' (Takov & Djia, 2020). This in environmental philosophy is the monumental shift 'from anthropocentrism to biocentrism', an attitude which 'calls for a shift from our

No, as the above view (Kant's) is
anthropocentric, so there's
a gap in your
argument here.

egoistic nature to a more altruistic one' (Takov & Djia, 2020). Austrian-British philosopher Wittgenstein found the acceptance of intrinsic value in beings problematic. He espoused the view that 'all beings are related or interdependent in a way or another' (Takov & Djia, 2020) and that 'these beings are not ends in themselves for there is always something superior to them' (Takov & Djia, 2020). He felt that intrinsic value cancels the beings' instrumentality, as all beings are inter-related and serve a purpose. The theory of intrinsic value also poses the question whether ethics in the anthropomorphic sense actually exists in the environment.

American abolitionist philosopher Tom Regan was a proponent of rights theory, which was firmly based on the criterion of inherent value, not environmental benefit or utility maximisation. Living beings are, according to Regan, subjects of a life, and their lives matter to them, independently of whether anyone else finds their lives useful (Regan, 1982). Animals are not only alive 'in the biological sense' but they also have a future, whatever that may be, which would be disrupted if they were harmed (Warren, 1987). Inherentism, according to Regan, has a central thesis, the respect principle: all subjects-of-a-life share the fundamental right to be treated with respect (Lengauer, 2020). This principle would, therefore, be violated if individuals were harmed to protect a species. Whether ending the life of an individual would result in a more balanced ecosystem, a human's being's meal or an adventure abroad full of adrenaline, the end result for the individual would be the same: death. Unless one lives in a tribe, there are very few occasions in today's urbanised world, where hunting is a matter of survival, just like it would be if a lion failed to kill a zebra for food.

Disjointed presentation
'Each to count for one and none for more than one.' (Singer, p.3). In *All Animals Are Equal*, Peter Singer quoted Jeremy Bentham's theory of moral equality extensively; that the interests of every individual are no more or less important than any other individual (Singer, p.3) and that 'the capacity for suffering is the vital characteristic that gives a being the right to equal consideration' (Singer, p.4). Just like Bentham, Singer uses slavery and racism to highlight the plight of non-human animals. Skin colour, body shape and intellectual capacities are not good enough reasons to regard certain fellow human and non-human beings as inferior or more worthy of inhumane treatment than others. Every sentient being is unique and not every human is intellectually superior to other species, examples being babies and mentally disabled people. This assumption does not mean that, we should, for example, defend the rights of animals to vote.

In Dog'an's *Defense of Animal Rights*, Jamieson states that 'rights are closely related to capacities: "Only creatures who can practise religion," he notes, "have rights to practice religion and only creatures who can fly have rights to fly"' (Dog'an, 2011). American philosopher Martha Nussbaum's capability theory supported the idea that a minimum requirement of justice for living a dignified human life should guarantee, amongst others, 'the right to life, bodily health, bodily integrity, senses, play and control over one's environment' (Melin, 2021). In later works, Nussbaum included sentient animals in her theory of

justice and argued that such animals are 'entitled to not be mistreated and to be regarded as ends in themselves and as subjects of justice, not only objects of compassion' (Melin, 2021).

Despite inequality amongst human ability, we still value them at an *individual* level, not as a 'biological collective' (Cooke & Chan, p.3). We draw our morality from individual traits, such as honesty, equality and freedom and not whether our species is valuable to the ecosystem. Despite human overpopulation, we do not attempt to control or cull the numbers, and do the best in our ability to save a life rather than destroy it, even in places where resources are scarce and life is difficult. Culling humans would be an unthinkable, inhumane and unethical concept. For humans, Bentham's theory that suffering matters is enough to determine the moral code under which we write our laws and punish wrongdoing (to prevent exactly that - human suffering). Killing 'invasive' non-human animals, for example, 'provides people with a justification and a sense of moral comfort about killing those who are deemed not to belong' (Inglis, 2020). It also 'supports the idea that conservation practice demands it' (Inglis, 2020). The value of individuals' lives is reduced to zero, and as a consequence, they are killed by extremely cruel methods. An example can be found in Australia, where foxes 'are subjected to programmes of steel traps, strychnine and other painful poisons' (Inglis, 2020).

Moral responsibility towards species – species have a right to life

The right of species to exist is supported by biocentrism, 'an ethical point of view that extends inherent value to all living things' (Derr & McNamara, 2003). Human beings have the ability to affect the lives of entire species, very often in a destructive way, so reassessing our moral responsibility towards protecting them is a priority. U.S. biologist Michael Soulé defended the value of species in themselves, 'a value neither conferred nor revocable, but springing from a species' long evolutionary heritage and potential' (Sandler, 2012), and U.S. philosopher J. Baird Callicott saw value in species, 'not necessarily homocentric but humanly conferred', the ability to be valued 'for themselves if not valuable in themselves' (Sandler, 2012). In *Do Species and Nature Have Rights?* James Huffman questioned, however, whether our moral responsibility towards species is essentially a moral responsibility towards the actual individuals representing it: '... we must look to subspecies and local variations on subspecies and ultimately to the individual organism if unique arrangements of genes are what we are protecting. Species are nothing, after all, but aggregations of individual organisms according to taxonomies contrived by the minds of humans' (Huffman, 1992). Furthermore, in order for (any) species to survive, is breeding between individuals not an absolute requirement, which, again, brings individual rights into the equation? 'If survival of particular genetic stocks is important to organismic group rights, then those rights cannot be assigned above the species level on the taxonomic system since the ability to breed one with another is obviously essential' (Huffman, 1992).

Speciesism

The context in which we very often hear that species need protection is often anthropocentric and less frequently animal- or biocentric. Lion trophy hunting in Africa is, for example, widely frowned upon, particularly by western urban societies because 'future generations will not be able to see lions in the wild when they visit Africa'. We tend to like large or beautiful animals, such as elephants and giraffes, more than invertebrates or crustaceans, which seem so alien to us, yet apparently as sentient. By favouring species over individuals and not applying a uniform principle of sentience, we run the risk of prioritising the pretty 'Disney' animals, or those who are closer to us physically and intellectually, such as apes, over species also vital to the ecosystem but more 'alien' to us, such as crustaceans, rodents, insects or even fish. American philosopher Tom Regan's theory of intrinsic value and the belief that sentience alone is a powerful enough reason to protect the right to life is more consistently applicable across individuals of all species, irrespective of size, form or affinity to humans. This principle is already in place in human societies, where every individual's life is legally protected, irrespective of the fact whether their existence benefits or harms the ecosystem as a whole. In *Anthropocentrism: A Misunderstood Problem*, Professor of Environmental Political Theory Tim Hayward reflected upon the moral inconsistency of speciesism: 'If it is wrong in the human case to inflict avoidable physical suffering because humans are sentient beings, then it would be morally arbitrary to allow the inflicting of suffering on other sentient beings' (Hayward, 1997).

Moral responsibility to individual animals and the precautionary principle

In 2005, a report on behalf of the Norwegian Scientific Committee for Food Safety concluded that the reactions of certain species (in this case invertebrates) do not necessarily indicate any experience of pain, but more 'an activation of the central nervous system to produce avoidance or escape reactions' (Sømme, 2005). For that reason, the need for more scientific research was addressed because 'suffering is a private experience that cannot be measured directly' (Sømme, 2005). The animals in question should, therefore, be given the benefit of doubt, an idea Professor of Philosophy J. Birch called 'the precautionary principle'. Professor Birch claimed that animal sentience takes precedent over cost-effective measures, which could result in serious, negative animal welfare outcomes (Birch, 2017). Further studies on decapod crustaceans and fish by biological scientists Appel and Elwood challenged not only our assumptions that crustaceans do not feel pain but also the way we assign moral (and subsequently legislative) worth to individuals and species that are not our own.

Conclusion

why contradictory?
Explain.

In *Practical Ethics*, Peter Singer supported the rather contradictory view that the consequences of an action vary according to circumstances, and that there is no single answer to the question whether it is wrong to kill an animal. An ethical stance, in his view, needs to be good not just in theory but also in practice (Singer, 2011). Singer views some of the core moral values as 'exchangeable' (Coffey, 2007), and very often trades compassion for practicality, a theory which would favour the survival of species over the individual. Life decisions, however, are not always based on rational happiness maximisation but also on emotional ties and attachments. Do we always base our decisions on rationality rather than desire? In 'The Incoherence of Peter Singer's Utilitarian Argument for Vegetarianism', Professor Thomas Wells claims we do not, and introduces another variable into the equation, complicity. We analyse our actions based on moral responsibility, not on our contribution to harms (Wells, 2016). English philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) used sentience as a 'criterion of moral standing' (Frey, 2011) and in his 18th century *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* asked: 'The question is not, Can they reason?, nor Can they talk? but, Can they suffer?' (Crimmins, 2020). Bentham's question pointed to suffering as the main criterion for equal consideration, which takes precedent over any other need or characteristic, such as language, intelligence, rationality or environmental benefits.

There are many reasons why human and non-human animal life should be treated with respect on an individual and not on a species basis. Animal physiology and anatomy are mostly very similar to ours and perform the same functions. Animals are fully conscious, aware and sentient. They know what is happening to them and have defence mechanisms to avoid danger and death. Their lives matter to them and make choices in order to live them the best they can. They plan ahead by storing food, building shelter and producing offspring. Human rights legislation exists to protect *individuals*, not species, irrespective of colour, race, ethnicity or class. This principle, based on the intrinsic value of human life, is more robust, scalable and irreplaceable. It remains unchanged when we learn more about sentience and intelligence, when governments change and when laws are abolished and replaced by others. It would be more difficult to universally assign the same degree of protection to millions of species that exist on this earth, from anemones, corals, ants, sharks, bears and trees to crabs, bugs, fungi and mites. Ultimately, where we, humans, seem to be failing is how we treat the natural world using an anthropocentric view; we preserve species and individuals that fit our landscape and exterminate the misfits. Instead, we should adopt a universal set of values, which would 'accommodate the interests of all animals' (Shelton, 2004) regardless of human preference. To conclude, if we acknowledge John Stuart Mill's definition of morality as an existence exempt as far as possible from pain, and recognise that humans and animals share a capacity for suffering (and in fact, as our knowledge of the animal kingdom expands, increasingly so) but we are still unsure what a satisfactory definition of the term 'species' would be, a definition which would adequately

Good
say
more
here.

satisfy both our scientific and philosophical concerns, then it would only be fair to give moral priority to individual non-human animals over a species, exactly as we do with human animals and their worth as individuals in a forward-thinking society.

4,014 words

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