

‘The question is not, can they reason, nor can they talk, but can they suffer’

(Bentham). Discuss in relation to the principle of equality and animals.

Bentham’s question proposes what is necessary to consider with regards to equality and fair treatment of animals. He suggests that a being’s capacity for suffering is significant when considering its rights and needs. For example, an infant child has not yet acquired the ability to reason or talk, yet they still have the ability to feel suffering (Francione, 2010). The question of whether or not non-human animals suffer is an interdisciplinary question which can be explored scientifically, philosophically, anthropologically, and ultimately has its roots in morality and ethics. Humans are merely one type of animal, thus non-human animals will hereafter be referred to in shorthand as “animals”. The issue of animal rights is a human issue, for it depends on exploring and understanding human-animal relationships and perceptions towards animals globally. It is necessary to explore the concept of equality and rights, and how exactly equality for animals should manifest.

Jeremy Bentham was a philosopher and utilitarian. Utilitarianism is a view that maintains that what is right or wrong is dependent on consequences, in other words, that the end justifies the means. The opposing view, that the end does not justify the means, is referred to as deontology. For example, a utilitarian view might suggest that it is morally sound to kill someone if doing so would have the wider effect of saving multiple lives. The deontological view would suggest that it’s never morally acceptable to kill someone, even if it would result in lives saved (Francione, 2010). Ultimately, utilitarianism proposes a moral view that what’s right depends on what will result in

greater happiness and wellbeing for the majority. When applying this view to animal rights, it suggests that it's crucial to consider the happiness and wellbeing of animals as well as humans, rather than placing emphasis on the wants and needs of humans, a concept referred to as speciesism. Singer (1976) argues that most humans are speciesist, and that this title isn't reserved for the exceptionally cruel and callous individuals. He argues that most human beings are guilty of taking part in practices that have an overall consequence of inflicting harm and suffering onto animals.

The principle of equality is an ethical concept which states that equal consideration is of more importance and relevance than identical treatment with regards to an individual's needs. Consequently it suggests that in order for there to be equality, separate beings should be given different treatment and rights (Singer, 1976) (See fig.1). One example of this in humans is with regards to disability. A paraplegic individual would require their environment to be wheelchair accessible, a primary need which isn't shared with their able-bodied peers. Thus, it is argued that fair consideration should be given to an individual's needs in order for there to be fairness and equality. In favor of the fight for equality it is often claimed that all humans are equal. This is not strictly true, as every human possesses uniquely individual abilities, levels of intellect, and are shaped by unequal experiences. However, sexism and racism is wrong because it suggests that attributes such as gender and race are of fundamental significance in the differences between humans, which is not the case. For example, women are not inherently of a lower level of intelligence than men, but rather individuals within both groups have differing intellectual capacities. What causes inequality between individuals is a complex mixture of many different factors and cannot be attributed to a single characteristic. In

fact, one could argue that it is often environmental factors rather than biological ones which determine an individual's experiences with regards to equality.

It is relevant to explore why equality matters. Some opposing views suggest that inequality is a positive thing. For example, functionalist views in the field of sociology perceive inequality as serving a necessary function in maintaining social order and motivating individuals to work hard to contribute to society (Beeden et al, 2015). The issue with this view is that social stratification disproportionately benefits those at the top of the social hierarchy, and those at the bottom are more so often discouraged from working hard rather than motivated to do so (see fig.2). Ultimately, this view focuses on how inequality serves society as a whole, rather than the individual. The value of equality is a matter of morality, the importance of which focuses on the experiences of the individual. Frankfurt (2001) suggests in relation to economic equality that morally the importance does not lie in having the same, but rather in having enough. Inequality arises when some don't have enough whilst others have more than they need. This relates the issue of equality to the concept of necessity. Equality is important because it seeks to ensure that an individual's needs are met.

The question of whether animals can suffer relates to the concept of consciousness, which is in itself an ambiguous and intangible thing. Consciousness in the animal kingdom is something which has long been debated, and is paramount in discerning what rights an animal should have. It is difficult to give fair consideration to something which we do not fully understand. The problem is exacerbated when we consider that different animals have different experiences of consciousness. Even between human individuals we have no way of knowing exactly whether one person's perception of

experiences aligns with another. Different individuals have different thresholds for pain. We don't know whether one human who breaks their arm experiences the pain of it to the same intensity as another human sustaining the same injury. In fact, we don't know with absolute certainty that others feel pain at all. We conclude that they do, based on a combination of factors, such as comparison with our own experiences, in other words, empathy, and external expressions of pain, such as crying out. Anyone with a cat or dog has likely experienced accidentally stepping on their paw, and their pet subsequently jumping up and yelping in, what we logically believe to be, pain. It is precisely these reactions that lead us to assume that others, both human and non-human, experience pain. However, if we don't know for certain that fellow humans feel pain with equal intensity, then to conceive of how deeply an animal feels pain is even more abstract (see fig.3). It stands to reason that a cow has a considerably alien perception of life compared to that of a cat or of a spider. Thus, different species of animals should be given equal yet different consideration.

The notion of suffering extends further than physical pain. Emotional and mental pain are a significantly important aspect of suffering to consider with regards to animal rights. Whether or not animals feel emotions is relevant in considering their needs and rights. Panksepp (2005) argues that the ability to experience core emotions such as seeking, fear, rage, lust, care, play, and panic is possessed by all mammals, and that the capacity to experience these emotions derives from nature rather than nurture. It has also been found that mice may be capable of experiencing empathy, in an experiment which found that mice who observed a familiar cagemate in pain were more sensitive to painful stimuli than mice who observed an unfamiliar mouse in pain (Langford *et al.*,

2006). Such research suggests that further to the experience of physical pain, animals may be capable of experiencing emotional pain and suffering.

Veganism is a growing trend, and it has been estimated that the number of vegans in the US grew from 4 million to 20 million between 2014 to 2018 (Meyer, 2022). Typically one's reasons for adopting a vegan lifestyle is a matter of ethics, for the benefit of animals as well as the environment. Veganism essentially stems from an intent to avoid harm to other living things. Some people in the world take this a step further, for example, followers of Jainism. Jainism is a religion originating in India and derived from Buddhism. One of the most fundamental aspects of Jainism is the principle of non-violence. Numerous aspects of a Jain's daily life including diet, clothes worn, details of meditation, confession, and worship, all center around avoidance of harm to all living things. This particular value is of such importance in Jainism that monks take careful and radical measures to avoid harm such as wearing masks over their mouths to avoid inhaling and consequently killing small insects (see fig.04), and aiming to sleep completely still so as not to crush any living things in their slumber (Laidlaw, 2005). For Jains, a vegan diet is an inadequate measure in avoiding harm to other living things. This raises an interesting ethical question- at which point are we humans absolved from the guilt of inflicting harm on animals and other living things? The animal welfare position dictates that it is acceptable to use animals as a resource, for example for food, so long as they're treated humanely and no 'unnecessary' harm or suffering is inflicted (Francione, 2010). The issue with this stance is it requires definition of what is unnecessary and what is humane, something that individual humans are unlikely to agree upon.

The Jain value of do no harm also raises an important question of exactly what species are deserving of protection. Some people, who would vehemently object to the killing of a cow or a pig, would see no issue in squashing a bothersome fly. It is often presumed that insects don't feel pain, due to the small size of their central nervous systems.

Morally, whether or not a being feels pain is often seen as the main consideration in whether killing it is wrong. Such a mentality is seldom applied to humans, which again highlights an inherently speciesist view. It would typically be deemed wrong to kill a fellow human being, regardless of whether they would experience pain in their demise, so it raises the question as to why it is acceptable to kill a fly based on the argument that it is unlikely to experience pain (see fig.05). This brings the argument back to the basis of suffering. According to Bentham's view, if a being doesn't experience suffering, it is not morally wrong to inflict harm.

Suffering is a fundamental factor to consider regarding the principle of equality. From the utilitarian viewpoint, what is right or wrong depends on what will result in happiness for the majority of beings. As pain and suffering is the inverse of happiness, that which causes suffering is inherently morally and ethically wrong. Further to this, it is important to consider both emotional and physical pain with regards to suffering. Much like racism and sexism, which places value and emphasis on the wellbeing of one group of beings over another, speciesism is also morally wrong from an utilitarian viewpoint. The principle of equality aims to grant equal and fair consideration to all beings, human and non-human alike. The concept of animal consciousness is something which is still being explored, of which many questions remain. However, both science and philosophy

suggest that animals do, in fact, experience suffering. There is sufficient evidence to infer that such suffering should be taken into consideration with regards to animal rights.

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Appendix of Images

Figure 01

<https://pixabay.com/photos/justitia-goddess-goddess-of-justice-2597016/> [Accessed 09/11/2022]



Figure 02

<https://pixabay.com/illustrations/rich-poor-inequality-richness-6940239/> [accessed 09/11/2022]

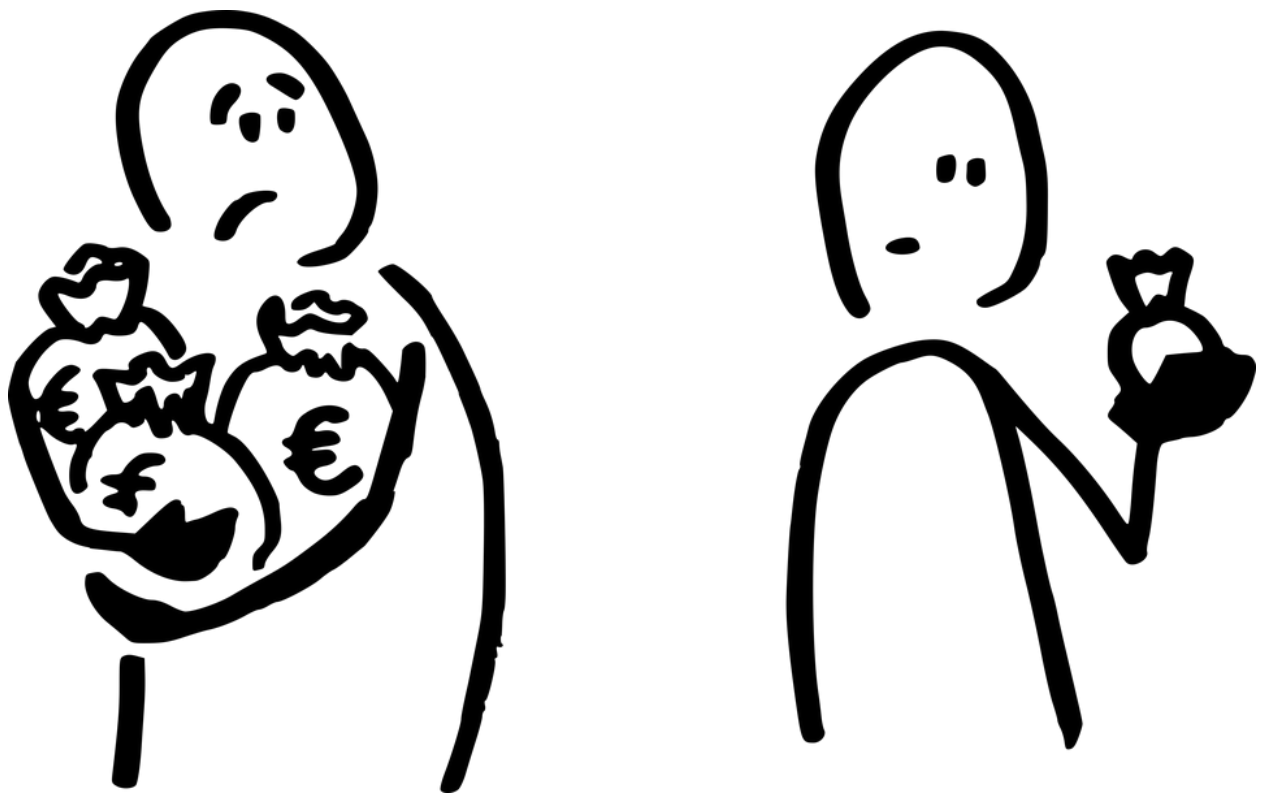


Figure 03

<https://pixabay.com/photos/cat-flower-kitten-stone-pet-2536662/> [accessed 09/11/2022]



Figure 04

<https://jainpedia.org/themes/practices/monks-and-nuns/> [accessed 09/11/2022]



Figure 05

<https://pixabay.com/photos/fly-insect-moss-compound-eyes-4264943/> [accessed 09/11/2022]

