

International Philosophy Olympiad 2012

“If (an animal) suffers, there can be no moral justification for disregarding that suffering, or for refusing to count it equally with the like suffering of any other being. But the converse of this is also true. If a being is not capable of suffering, or of enjoyment, there is nothing to take into account.”

– Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (1975).

The concern of the excerpt is in relation to the issue of animal rights, and more so that which constitutes as a meta-ethical justification for universal morality. The issue of whether or not animals should be treated as equal to humans as moral objects, and what brings about this all-encompassing standard, is a topic of interest that shall be discussed in detail during this discourse. There are several elemental concepts that are tied to consequentialism and more importantly, utilitarianism; with regards to being applied into the realm of sentient beings.

Firstly, the definition of suffering is a complex endeavor, often disagreed upon among philosophers in their various results. However – in order to pursue the point of more importance -, the definition of suffering that was intended on the author’s part can be deducible. As his primary concern is for the suffering of animals initially, this can be prescribed to be defined as being ‘the recognizable physiological and/or physical discomfort inflicted onto different creatures.’¹ As it would be a *non-sequitor* to attempt to take into consideration any suffering that is not visibly recognizable, we arrive at a definition of suffering that is largely dependent upon our own perception, be it accurate or poor. Although the existence of suffering can be disputed on the theoretical level, it is perhaps better not to venture outside the reasonable perimeters of this discourse, and assume that suffering is in fact *real*.

An issue of consequence that is vital for the basis of the argument is, that suffering is equal in itself, regardless of the *sufferee*’s own nature (be it human, animal or plant). It is fair to say that when a rock is thrown at a human A and an animal B, both will ‘suffer’. This is obvious as such, since the human will cry out in pain and the animal will whelp or howl.² Nevertheless, merely because suffering is a term that is applicable to the condition of animals and humans, does not entail that the suffering of humans and the suffering of animals is the *same*, in the sense of how it is felt (phenomenology). The presumption is made that pain, be it towards human or animal, is completely or nearly similar. This claim cannot be well substantiated, as we unfortunately lack the ability of communication with the creatures of the world, and cannot verbally compare our sensations. Therefore, doubt in this respect arises toward the question if we suffer *equally*, or if our suffering is merely similar. In order to understand this, animals (as a general reference to non-human animals) and

¹ Definition relates to animal suffering, as distinguished between human suffering, which is better understood as an opposite but similar in nature of John Stuart Mill’s depiction of *pleasure*.

² Discussion on if animals do suffers would be side-stepping the issue, therefore further deliberation is not made on that topic. Rocks are universal pain-causers in this discourse.

humans must be compared in their state of suffering. Consider different scenarios of suffering:

A rock hits the head of B (dog) and A (human).

A and B fail their matriculation examinations.

A and B wallow in the darkest vacuums of existentialist despair.

Although the last two examples are rather frivolous in nature, they do serve a specific design. It is well known that animals (take dogs that have worked in EOD units³) can become depressed, shell-shocked, and long for their dead caretaker; so in this respect the suffering of animals can be of greater complexity than mere physical sensations of pain. The point is however, that humans are generally (almost absolutely) creatures able to experience a wider and more elaborate spectrum of sentience than animals. Our sufferings – often great mysteries that drive humanity into depressing philosophy, poetry and whisky – are in many cases highly abstract and their origin, unknown. Being more exposed to the ‘universe’ in terms of our perception opens our channel of life to feelings and pleasures more exhilarating, but also to suffering much darker, and deeper sorrows of agony and despair. To further drive this point, take for instance John Stuart Mill’s distinction of pleasures between the *higher* and *lower* quality. If reading Wordsworth is truly better than drinking beer⁴, then would not the opposite be also true; namely, suffering which is mental (e.g., Kierkegaard’s existentialist despair) would be *worse* than suffering which is physical/physiological (e.g., after-dinner constipation). Therefore, there are qualitative differences in suffering as there is in pleasures also. Although this would require further expansion to present itself as a more credible argument, the point remains one of interest and should not be quickly disregarded. In conclusion, there is an existing distinction between the ‘depth’ of suffering that is felt by humans and animals, which further draws into the question of animals and humans being *equal* moral objects.⁵ As our sufferings are greater though, we should be of more ‘primary’ consequence when in ethical deliberations.

Despite this being in a real sense an issue that should be accounted for, one must hesitate before accepting it, since it has yet to be taken to its logical conclusion. Given that animals and humans (out of possessing differing obtuseness in their various faculties) are unequal moral objects, meaning that the suffering of the ‘higher’ is worse than the suffering of the ‘lower’, then:

Humans that possess incredibly developed faculties for suffering would then be of greatest moral consequence, as they suffer more ‘thoroughly’ than their blunt human and animal counterparts.

³ Explosive Ordinance Disposal.

⁴ Compliments to John Stuart Mill for his excellent analogy.

⁵ The term ‘moral objects’ simply refers to objects that are moral ‘weights’ (if you will).

Given this further distinction of inequality among humans as well, one might – out of purely human intentions of good-will – conclude that such favoritism out of ‘sensitivity’ is not an adequate basis for driving a hedge further into human society or the animal kingdom. In continuation of this view, let us take a similar point of initiation as that which is done in political philosophy concerning universal equality: viz. humans, although having differences (skin tone, hair colour, physical build, sexual orientation), all are applied equality in treatment within a state.⁶ If the basic similarity, being humanness, justifies equality in the socio-political sense; then why would not the similarity of suffering constitute itself as a characteristic of sufficient reason to level humans and animals as equal moral objects? Seeing as both of them suffer, the fact of the matter can be granted. This universalization done on the basis of one similarity is open to criticism through analogy, but maintains its strength as the only factor that is applicable as *bad* is suffering, and so would not in the least be an unreasonable claim or improper use of inference.

The dilemma that appears in the commencement of the quote is one of the prescriptions of a moral double standard. This – as it is stated as universally unjustifiable – takes on the assumption that all suffering is always bad, and “there is no moral justification for disregarding that suffering (of animals).” With all the powers of proper hermeneutical deduction, the claim refers to what often happens amongst the circles of men and women, namely: considering for instance through exemplar; that a dog hit on the side of the road is a mere inconvenience on the way to the store for groceries, while simultaneously believing that a child being hit by a car is the greatest of tragedies. In this, he does well to bring into account the unjustified double-standard that we apply in the course of our lives. If in fact:

A and B are affected by C equally, and both suffer as a consequence.

A and B are thus the same, vis-à-vis being moral objects.

How then can equal suffering (given an instance were the suffering is equal) be excused by a gesture towards the Heavens, saying ‘Humans are distinct from animals’, since both remain in terms of *suffering* equal. In order to escape this notion of equality as *moral objects*, the appeal can be made to animals and humans being *moral agents*. It is well to say that animals deserve the same ethical consideration as humans do, but do then moral judgments and responsibilities apply to animals as well, as they have been accepted into the realm of being ethical objects? If a child (as children do) pushes another child into a shallow pond, is he not immediately told that teasing other pupils is *wrong*, and suffers detention as a consequence? Why should animals not be subject to the same moral judgments, for instance when a cat violently scratches a peaceful person whom was offering it food? Usually, we disqualify such actions out of their primitive ignorance, as they do not know any better. If

⁶ The utopian example is non-existent in reality, and is primarily designed as an analogy, and not a depiction of how ‘benevolent’ governments treat their subjects around the world.

such is the case, humans of greater moral intuition/realization/configuration than other humans would by consistency of argument, be required to be judged by a higher standard of moral statute.

If lack of ethical consideration justifies exclusion from judgment (as what are moral guidelines without enforcement), then the wiser the person, the higher the responsibility of ethical behavior.⁷

And if such is the case, escape from moral judgment would be only one 'persuasive claim of ignorance' away; and that barely makes sense in any respect. The design was to illustrate that greater knowledge – although increasing responsibility – does not automatically guarantee greater retributive measures. Also, the measures of punishment float around three main intentions: medicinal, deterrence and retribution. In this respect, the assumption that notions of justice/law and ethical behavior have any connection with each other is faulty, but there seems to be no other way to present the treatment of moral actors equally other than by means of legal analogy.

In the conclusion of the excerpt, it draws in the result of the opposite of suffering, being the absence of it and/or pleasure. Here, the consequentialist nature of the text becomes strikingly evident. As suffering is the absolute characterization of badness, anything that does *not* produce suffering *cannot* be bad, and anything that does not suffer is not a moral object in itself (no sentient potential). This raises the question, that why *suffering ought to* be always determined as morally bad. Humans and animals alike may not enjoy suffering in itself, but nevertheless, the establishment of suffering as an absolute evil is questionable. Does the widespread dislike of something make it by default a principle to be universally applied and acted by? The weakness for the basis appears in that its self-construction is portrayed as originating from nothing more than an emotional state of distaste that is conveniently agreed upon by many.

To argue in favor of suffering as a universal evil, consider that which is desirable to humans as an end in itself: pleasure. All we do is in hopes of avoiding pain and gaining pleasure, although we may receive more enjoyment from delayed pleasure than such that is immediate.⁸ If pleasure is in fact the only desirable thing as an in itself, then would that not be a sufficient of a reason to call is *good*, given it does not simultaneously harm others. A fortiori, it would be absurd to demand of people anything else accept the pursuit of pleasure, since that is the base setting for all human activity. In despite of this, the *is/ought* fallacy is made, as the moral stance still makes the assumption the pleasure *ought* to be pursued as an end, simply because it is pursued as an end. In the opposite and reciprocal

⁷ The notion of justice and punishment has been introduced, but should be taken with levity since the point that is being made is the equal attitude towards equal moral actors.

⁸ This does not mean that pleasure is not divided into categories of quality/quantity.

way, suffering is avoided at all cost, and as it is characterized as always undesirable (even for sadists, whom gain pleasure from pain). If suffering is universally undesired, then it is reasonable to state that it is necessarily *bad*. The strength of the concept of suffering is in that it is always defined as undesirable discomfort, and so it does not run into any internal contradictions with real-world issues.

Ad finem to all that has been said, the distinction between animals and humans in relation to suffering as moral objects appears to touch on the line of both compromise and reason. Although humans suffer with more enhanced feeling, the exclusion of animals cannot be made so quickly, since they do suffer as well, just not with the same audacity. Even if suffering is characterized as universally evil, there does not appear to be a root of sufficient reason in the claim that animals are fully our 'moral' equals, since there is no reason to make such a charge of equality, or to apply it with such generosity. Given that an animal and human suffer equally, the two are of equal scale; but in reality, a species will favor its own kind. Furthermore, even if animals cannot be claimed to be agents of the ethical or under an ethical standard, it does not provide for with credible reason to exclude them as moral objects and reduce them to ash. On the contrary, the utter universality of suffering as a captivating force of evil⁹ makes hard enquiry into to our personal attitude towards animals, which – more often than not – is plagued by double standards and self-sought rationalizations that treat the suffering of creatures with cynically cruel levity.

⁹ The term is used loosely without any implied religious connotation or denotation.