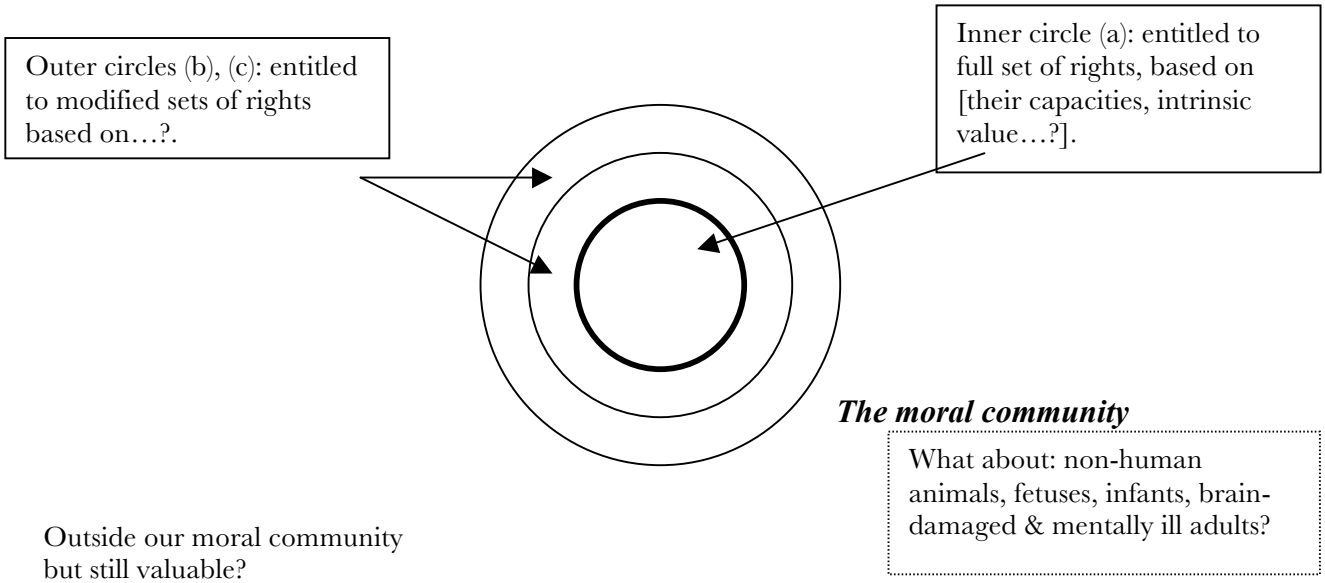
Animal Liberation and the Moral Community

1) What is our *immediate* moral community? Who should be treated as having equal moral worth?
2) What is our *extended* moral community? Who must we take into account morally speaking?
3) How does a thing get into our moral community? What entitles it to moral consideration?

I. Our moral community

The notion of "rights" applies best within our immediate moral community. It's not just that we must treat "insiders" with respect; they are *owed* that respect because of their moral status, .



On what basis do things qualify as belonging in (a), i.e., the inner circle? One possible answer[1]: full critical self-awareness; the ability to manipulate complex concepts and to use a sophisticated language…; and the capacity to reflect, plan, deliberate, choose, an accept responsibility for acting (182). These belong in (a) because they are or could be full moral agents. Animals are not included. Space aliens with sufficient cognitive capacities might be included. What about fetuses? Infants? Brain damaged adults? Human beings in comas or seriously senile?

> Let us say, then, that although underdeveloped or deficient humans are also, like animals, not full members of the moral community because they lack autonomy, they must nevertheless fall within the most immediate extension of the moral community and as such are subject to its protection. (Fox, 189)

So it seems that on his view, they fall within (b). Why? It cannot be because they will develop the full range of capacities distinctive of autonomy, because they may not. Rather, he suggests sympathy with the idea that we are connected to them via a "chain of love and concern" (189). But the question isn't whether we happen to feel more concern for a suffering infant or brain damaged adult than a suffering puppy or elephant, it's whether we *should* feel more concern for one than the other. What are our actual moral responsibilities here, and why? Is it OK simply to destroy creatures who lack autonomy, or cause them to suffer? Is it OK simply to destroy ecosystems?

[1] See, e.g., Michael Allen Fox, "The Moral Community," in Hugh LaFollette, *Ethics in Practice*. Oxford 2006.

Singer suggests that the boundaries of our moral community are set by which individuals have *interests*, in particular interests based in their capacity to *suffer*, i.e., experience pain. Beings with more complex capacities for pain and suffering lie within (a), and those with less complex capacities lie in (b) and (c).

II. Our obligations to things of value

Recall the distinction between instrumental goods and intrinsic goods: something is instrumentally good if it is good *as a means* to some other good. Intrinsic goods are good *in themselves.* We can now begin to clarify this further. Whether or not something is an instrumental good is a matter of *how we value it:* do we value it as a means to something else, or do we value it for its own sake? A heuristic to determine whether you value something instrumentally is to consider: would you still value it even if it didn't have the same effects?

Intrinsic goods are better contrasted not with instrumental goods, but extrinsic goods. An extrinsic good is valuable because of its relation to something else as opposed to some fact about *it.* A heuristic to bring out the contrast is the "isolation test": X is intrinsically valuable just in case it would be valuable even in a world where there was nothing else. Possible examples (some controversial):

Valued instrumentally: vaccinations
Valued for its own sake: pleasure
Extrinsically valuable: photo of Gandhi, wedding ring
Intrinsically valuable: health, happiness

We now need another distinction between conferred and unconferred goods. Something has *conferred* value just in case it is valuable because someone values it. Something has unconferred value just in case it has value regardless of whether or not it is valued. Note that if things have conferred value, they are extrinsically valuable. (Can things be extrinsically valuable without that value being conferred?)
Value conferred: money
Value unconferred: honesty, courage (moral virtue, generally)

Questions to consider:
i) Is anything intrinsically good that is not good *for* humans?
ii) Is all value conferred (by humans)?

Definitions and possible principles:

Pro Tanto obligation ("only so far" obligation) also sometimes called a *prima facie obligation* ("at first glance" obligation): an obligation that may be overridden by other moral considerations.

Intrinsic value principle (recall Kant's Principle of Humanity): Things with intrinsic value should be valued for their own sake and not merely instrumentally.

Possible principle: Because of their intrinsic value, we have a prima facie obligation to avoid destroying animals, and healthy ecosystems (of a certain degree of complexity)—and what else?—independent of human attitudes towards them or good they may bring to humans.

III. Equal consideration

Pain, suffering, and death, are generally agreed to be bad things. From a moral point of view, it seems that the badness of pain doesn't depend on *who* feels it; its badness resides simply in *what* it feels like. As Peter Singer says, "How bad a pain is depends on how intense it is and how long it lasts…pains of the same intensity and duration are equally bad…"[2] Although it is morally permissible—perhaps even morally required—for me to respond to my daughter's pain differently from a stranger's pain, in cases where I don't have such special duties it seems that I should be impartial and respond simply to the badness of the situation.

Claims of equality are not descriptive claims about equal talents, abilities, and the like. Rather, they are claims about moral worth and respect. It is clear that the Declaration of Independence is not asserting

[2] See "Equality for Animals." *Practical Ethics* 1979, Ch. 3. https://www.utilitarian.net/singer/by/1979----.htm

that "all men are created [with] equal [intelligence…etc.]," for that would be clearly false. Instead it is claiming that the well-being of each person is of equal value. Happiness is happiness, pain is pain, regardless of whose it is.

The idea that each person's welfare is of equal value does not entail, however, that we must be treated the same way. Valuing their welfare equally will require recognizing their differences and providing differential treatment. A system of *formal equality* is one that guarantees equal treatment in the sense that it does not allow arbitrary factors such as race or sex to be the basis for differential treatment. A system of *substantive equality* aims to demonstrate equal respect for everyone's welfare. In order to achieve substantive equality, something must be done to address different needs even though it involves different treatment. Example: access to the break room.

IV. Animal suffering

With these points in place, we can now turn to Singer's argument supporting the equality of animals.

1. The capacity to suffer (experience pleasure and pain) is the basis for equal consideration in a moral community. (356)
2. Someone is granted equal consideration just in case their welfare counts equally to others regardless of "what they are like or what abilities they may possess", though what form our consideration should take may "vary according to the characteristics of those affected". (354)
3. Non-human animals have the capacity to suffer. (354)
4. Therefore, the welfare of non-human animals should count equally to the welfare of humans. (from 1-3)
5. Therefore, we should make as much effort to avoid causing pain and suffering to non-human animals as we do to avoid causing pain and suffering to humans, taking into account the different ways that sentient beings can suffer. (from 4)
6. Therefore, we should "make radical changes in our treatment of animals that would involve our diet, the farming methods we use, experimental procedures in many fields of science, our approach to wildlife and to hunting, trapping and the wearing of furs, and areas of entertainment like circuses, rodeos, and zoos." (from original, see footnote 2)

<u>Steinbock's Objection</u>

"Certain capacities, which seem to be unique to human beings, entitle their possessors to a privileged position in the moral community." (401) These capacities include: responsibility for action, moral autonomy, capacity to reciprocate, ability to be motivated by altruism and moral concern, and a desire for self-respect. It is true that we would not tolerate a hierarchical society based on a degree of intelligence or cognitive capacity. But a minimal level of intelligence can be used as a "cut-off point" (402) for moral consideration. This does not entail that we must treat humans with limited capacities with less respect and consideration, because we have special duties and special feelings towards them that we don't have towards non-human animals.

<u>Questions:</u>

• Do we really have special duties t*o members of our species,* as a group. that we don't have toward members of other species. What are these duties and how do they justify speciesism?

• Is it really the capacity to suffer that entitles one equal consideration, or is it other higher-level capacities that food-animals and experimental animals don't have. If the latter, how do we justify the idea that we should treat humans without these higher-level capacities with greater respect than non-human animals?

• It is difficult to compare the suffering of non-human animals and the suffering of humans, since we can't talk to non-human animals. Might it be that the happiness brought about by wearing a fur coat outweighs the suffering of the animals that were killed to make it?

V. Animal killing

Singer acknowledges that the question of killing animals is more complicated than the question of causing pain. Human lives are very different from non-human lives. Humans are capable of self-awareness, planning, complex social relationships, and the like, that make for goods over the span of a life that are not available to non-human animals. To kill a human is to put an end to distinctively human goods. So killing a human is worse than killing an animal, and if there is pressure to choose between killing a human and killing a non-human animal, it would usually be permissible to kill the animal.

Acknowledging this, however, Singer maintains[3]:

> To avoid speciesism we must allow that beings who are similar in all relevant respects have a similar right to life—and mere membership in our own biological species cannot be a morally relevant criterion for this right. (Singer "All Animals are Equal," 357)

So Singer is willing to hold that killing animals should be treated as comparable to killing babies with serious birth defects or killing someone in a state of advanced senility. Whether or not that is ever justified is an open question.

In other words, Singer thinks that his approach to animal rights helps us understand that the moral boundary we should respect is not the boundary between humans and non-humans, but between beings with certain capacities and others without them. Some humans lack the full spectrum of normal human capacities; some non-human animals have capacities that significantly overlap ours. The capacity to suffer is one that unites us with non-humans in a moral community; complex intellectual and emotional capacities divide humans into smaller sub-groups. As Singer sees it, these broader and narrower groupings are the morally relevant ones. Instead most of us are making the serious error of treating the boundaries of our species as the boundaries of our moral community.

Questions:

- Is it permissible to kill plants? Must we all become fruitarians?
- Isn't it natural for animals to kill and eat animals of other species? If so, then why shouldn't we do the same? What is the relationship between what's natural and what's morally required?
- Isn't there something especially valuable about all humans, even if in particular cases they can't manifest the full range of human capacities? How should we understand the notion of "human dignity" or "human worth"?

[3] *Applied Ethics: Critical Concepts in Philosophy*, vol 4, ed. Ruth Chadwick and Doris Schroeder, Routledge 2002.

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