Do Animals Have Rights Essay, Research Paper

Do Animals Have Rights?

Should animals be harmed to benefit mankind? This pressing question has been around for at least the past two centuries. During the early nineteenth century, animal experiments emerged as an important method of science and, in fact, marked the birth of experimental physiology and neuroscience as we currently know it. There were, however, guidelines that existed even back then which restricted the conditions of experimentation. These early rules protected the animals, in the sense that all procedures performed were done so with as little pain as possible and solely to investigate new truths. Adopting the animals? perspectives, they would probably not agree that these types of regulations were much protection, considering the unwanted pain that they felt first followed by what would ultimately be their death. But, this is exactly the ethical issue at hand. For the most part, animal rights are debated in regards to two issues: 1) whether animals have the ability to rationalize or go through a logical thought process and 2) whether or not animals are able to experience pain. However, ?it will not do simply to cite differences between humans and animals in order to provide a rational basis for excluding animals from the scope of our moral deliberations? (Rollin 7). This, Bernard Rollin claims, would be silly. He says that to do this is comparable to a person with a full head of hair excluding all bald men from his moral deliberations simply because they are bald. The true ethical question involved is, ?do these differences serve to justify a moral difference?? (Rollin 7). Also, which differences between humans and non-humans are significant enough to be considered in determining the non-human?s fate?

Over the years, many differences have been proposed. Some theorize that rights depend upon the ability to possess interest, which in turn depend upon the ability to form verbal formulations, for example. If this were so, then it would rule out the possibility of rights for most animals, with maybe the exception of some primates. But, as Rodd states, ?beings incapable of possessing genuine rights might possess moral status in virtue of other qualities, such as the capacity for suffering? (Rodd 4). So, it is easily seen how many views have accumulated over time. The task of determining animal rights has also come into the context of examining these inherent differences on qualitative and quantitative levels. We can say, for instance, that on a qualitative level, a cow is less intelligent than a human. But, we must then determine, on a quantitative level, how much more unintelligent that cow really is when compared to humans. And, once we decide that, we must then decide if that margin of intelligence is enough for us humans to slaughter that cow in order to benefit human kind from its products.

Questions like this and others, which are very similar, have become the snowballing debate over the question of animal rights. Where do we draw the line? How do we determine the value of another being?s life? Well, up to this point, we as a society have been pretty confident in judging the lives of millions of animals worldwide (or so we can conclude by looking at the number of animals sacrificed each year for the purpose of experiment, education, goods, etc.). We must first step back and analyze the ethical dilemma at hand and then proceed to carefully weigh its consequences.

If we examine the question of animal rights cautiously, it is most often viewed as an ethical dilemma as opposed to an economic or cultural issue. This is due to the fact that a life is at stake and we, as humans, must decide if we are justified to take that life, while in the process inflicting suffering, in order to benefit society as a whole. We must almost play God, in a sense, in deciding which animal lives are expendable and which are valuable enough to allow to remain living. This ethical dilemma almost assigns a value to life. The debate over animal rights asks if it is worth killing innocent animals in order to benefit such items as education, material production or human medicine. Looking at this argument, one might say that humans are greedy and disrespectful of God?s creation. But, are we supposed to try experimental medicines and surgical procedures on humans and risk their death? Or is it better to educate students about anatomy and physiology through the sacrifice of animals? Ethically, does the end justify the means? David Lee Miller argues that for us to engage in a strictly ethical conversation on the topic of animal rights, ?we would do well to suspend our individual material interests in the outcome of the discussion? (Miller 3). I agree with Miller here that to speak of the determination of animal rights on an ethical level, which is where it should be, we certainly cannot be concerned with how nice it would be to have a full-length mink coat or a fabulous alligator purse. It must come down to the ethics of killing an animal for the sake of the value of its life and not for the sake of weighing the amount of money you will receive for the sale of one hundred pounds of beef. But, simply by looking at how large this debate has grown, we can see that making this separation is very difficult. Often times, material interests get in the way and lead our ethical thought astray. But can it be alright to allow these interests to take charge? This all depends on your ethical standpoint regarding the assignment of rights to animals. If you believe their rights to be non-existent, then what do you care if millions of them are killed? On the other hand, if you see all life as equal then the ?senseless? killing of animals is comparable to the slaughter of innocent human beings. There are many viewpoints concerning this issue that need to be dealt with in order to fully grasp the mindset of those so deeply involved in the struggle to determine what, if any, rights that animals possess.

Tom Regan, a professor of philosophy at North Carolina State University and one of the leading proponents of this theory, claims that animals have ?rights? ? the right to be treated in a certain way. Regan claims that animals have preferences, goals, and most importantly, mental states that enter into the explanation of their behavior. In his words, animals are ?subjects of a life? just like humans and each subject of life contains ?inherent value?. What Regan means by this is that by performing experiments on animals, you are reducing them to mere tools and violating their basic rights. He justifies his theory by using an example containing the retarded and insane. He says that if these types of persons are allowed moral rights, despite their inability to think rationally, then all mammals should have moral rights. Also, he states that discriminating on the basis of species is really fundamentally just the same moral mistake as discrimination on the basis of race or sex. Discriminating on these terms is morally irrelevant and fails to accord equal consideration, states Regan. Another theory that is against cruelty to animals in such a manner is an approach that is epitomized in the writings of both St. Thomas Aquinas and Immanuel Kant. This viewpoint differs from Regan?s because it suggests that animals are not necessarily direct objects of moral concern. However, there are definitely certain things that are not morally justifiable in treating animals in this manner. With this view, cruelty to animals is forbidden, not because animals are objects of moral attention, but rather because of the psychological fact that people who brutalize animals may tend to behave in the same manner toward other people. Still, this theory denies that animals should be used as experimental tools, although it does so in a way that leaves the possibility of their rights very fuzzy. A final important theory that supports giving animals their rights involves the topic of pain. Do animals feel pain? According to David Lee Miller, if non-human animals act like they are experiencing pain, then they probably are. If non-human animals act like they experience pain, but somehow do not, states Miller, then it would be strange happenstance. Miller claims that even for those who are deemed not to exhibit qualities such as consciousness, they should still be given the benefit of the doubt. This theory is justified because it relates very directly how humans and non-humans share very similar reactions to the same stimuli, in this case, pain.

On the other hand, there are several theories that affirm animals should not be assigned rights. Most of these theories revolve around the notion that animals do not have the ability to reason, which is considered the most important feature of humans and is what sets them apart from non-humans. One of the most persuasive reasons usually offered for excluding animals from being direct objects of moral consideration is the claim that whereas man possesses an immortal soul, animals are not so blessed. This theory has dominated the Catholic Church and the popular mind for centuries. The supporters of this theory believe that since there exists a lack of soul in non-humans, there also exists a lack of reason, which in turn, demotes animals below humans and causes us to see them as inferior. Once we see them as inferior, it is extremely easy to deny their rights. Another viewpoint concerning the denial of animal rights is seen widely in the scientific community. Most scientists believe that since they have already demonstrated that human benefits are derived from animal experimentation, there is no need to provide any ethical argument that justifies harming millions of animals each year. They say that animals provide too much human benefit (food, transportation, entertainment) for us to be concerned with any moral aspects of whether or not to keep harming them. Finally, it is believed that only creatures capable of acting morally are themselves deserving of moral concern. This theory states that moral laws and principles are the product of a sort of social contract, which only rational beings are capable of participating in. The contract is an agreement among only rational individuals to treat others in a certain way, provided that they are themselves treated the same way in return. Since animals cannot enter into agreements such as these, mainly because they lack reason and language, they cannot be considered objects of moral concern.

Looking at both sides of the argument, I see a much stronger case for the use of animals in experimentation, education, and overall human benefit. First of all, I think that there is way too much human reliance on animals to stop their use for human benefit. They provide us with commodities such as meat, safe medicines (indirectly), and a greater understanding of anatomy which allows millions of humans to be saved each year. Some life form has to ?take one for the team?, in a sense, so which one would you choose? Would you die for an animal? Also, some animal advocates say that the mammal is valued and that its properties are unique. This seems like a large contradiction in the sense of a denial of equality if you ask me. If the key issue is the animal?s life, why do they put some life on a pedestal and leave others on the ground? Then where can you draw the line? Do fleas have the same inherent value as apes? To me, all animals are equally inferior since none of them can reason or express a logical thought. I see animals as very primitive as a whole. Also, since superiority depends obviously on differences in composure, some question which difference is most valuable. Some suggest that animals possess many characteristics that are superior to humans, such as smell and hearing. However, it is obviously reason that dominates over everything else since we humans are the only ones that possess it and are obviously the most advanced.

Remaining on the topic of reason, I turn to the theories and views held by one of the great German philosophers of the Enlightenment, Immanuel Kant. Kant argues that only rational beings can count as moral agents and, even more importantly for my purpose in this paper, that the scope of moral concern extends only to rational beings. This notion of reason is central to the philosophy of Kant. A large aspect of the possession of reason in Kant?s view is the ability to arrive at knowledge that cannot be shown to be false by experience and can be known to be true simply by thought. A good example of this a priori knowledge is, ?The sum of the angles of a triangle is 180 degrees?. As everyone who had studied geometry knows, that statement can be proven by reason, and once it has been proved, we can say that we know it must be true. The important part of this concept for this paper is the fact that Kant claims that only human beings can possess this type of knowledge, and only the possession of this knowledge can allow a being to assert judgements that claim universally . This idea of universal claims brings me to Kant?s idea of the ?categorical imperative?. This, he believes, is the correct principle for determining how rational beings ought to treat one another, or themselves for that matter. The ?categorical imperative? states that one should never make an exception for one?s self by acting on reasons that one could not will every other rational being to act on. He states, ?I ought never to act except in such a way that I can also will that my maxim should become universal law? (Kant 70). In Kant?s deontological system, universalizing the exception destroys the rule. He also formulates an idea of duty in which he claims that, ?Duty is the necessity to act out of reverence for the [moral] law? (Kant 68), and, ?human action is morally good if it is done from duty alone? (class outline). These statements reflect on Kant?s idea of seeing moral actions on a basis of ends and means. Kant, believing that the only rational beings are human beings, states that we should value human beings simply for their function as rational beings and respect that function for its own sake, or their end, regardless of their usefulness for us. We should never treat humans solely as a means to some end we happen to have.

Looking at Kant?s arguments, I believe that he would share my overall perspective that animals do not possess rights. Kant believes that only human beings are rational due to the fact that only humans can entertain, understand, and formulate statements that are universal in scope. So, only human beings fall within the scope of moral concern. Animals, he claims, cannot have a sense of a priori knowledge because they are tied to stimulus and response reactions. For example, animals may respond to this particular fire in a way that indicates its awareness that this fire is dangerous here and now, but only humans have the capacity to understand that all fires are potentially dangerous. Also, Kant states that only rational beings are ?ends in themselves?, meaning that only rational beings should be valued for their own sake. Kant actually states, as noted by Rollin, that ?Animals are? merely as means to an end. That end is man? (Rollin 19). Therefore, in Kant?s perspective, if animals are not rational and only rational beings should be seen as ends, animals are simply a means with a certain instrumental value available for human exploitation. However, Kant does assert that we should avoid cruelty to animals. He does not contradict himself, though. He desires to avoid cruelty because he believes that this sort of behavior can lead to cruelty towards men or, on a lower scale, that cruelty to an animal causes human harm since it is damage to his/her property.

While Immanuel Kant would clearly have a distinct view on animal rights, other philosophers, such as John Stuart Mill, might not be as easily inclined to take a stand either way. Mill believes in a philosophy called utilitarianism. Mill?s approach, which is sometimes called Hedonistic Utilitarianism, holds that pleasure and pleasure alone is intrinsically good, while pain and pain alone is intrinsically evil. To determine what the best consequences would be in any given case, they think, we must determine which alternative available to us will bring about the optimum balance of pleasure over pain for everyone affected by the outcome. In other words, they want to induce the most pleasure for the greatest number of people and the least pain for the smallest number of people. Pleasure, in their view, denotes happiness, while pain denotes unhappiness. Utilitarianism takes into account the pleasures and pains of everyone affected by the outcome of what we do. It will not allow us to consider the pleasures and pains of some and ignore the pleasures and pains of others. Mill was a believer in the highest good, which he states, will follow the principle of utility. The principle of utility argues that action that produces happiness is morally correct. His idea of the principle of utility, therefore, is a consequentialist theory, or one that determines our moral direction through our consequences.

My interpretations of Mill?s viewpoints lead me to the conclusion that utilitarians would not take a particular stance on animal rights until they had examined the entire scope of the scene. Looking at this issue from a utilitarian perspective, an animal?s rights are completely dependent upon the issue of pleasure versus pain. First of all, they would have to decide if animals actually felt pain. As stated earlier in the essay, some hypothesize that animals feel pain simply because their physical reactions to stimuli that cause humans pain are very close to the physical reactions of humans under the same stimuli. If it was concluded that animals did in fact feel pain, Mill, or any utilitarian, would have to take every creature?s interest into account. This includes everyone from a man who needs a baboon heart to survive, to a woman who enjoys mink coats, to the animal who feels the pain from both of the previous cases. Since the utilitarians want to reduce as much pain as possible, they would need to decide which would be lesser: the pain felt by the animals during experimentation or the pain felt by humans if there were a lack of animal experimentation. In the end, I believe that the principle of utility would have to guide the utilitarians in their decision whether or not to assign rights to animals. Moral correctness regarding animal rights would have to come as a result of weighing the pleasures and pains of both humans and animals and deciding what is best for mammals as a whole.

Both Kant and Mill express a number of extremely valid points, along with some weak arguments, in their philosophical views as applied to animal rights. Kant?s inspection of reason is very logical as seen in his idea of a priori knowledge. Only humans could be capable of such a task since animals generally do respond to instinct. Evidence of this claim sets humans apart from animals through one of the most important arguments regarding the issue of animal rights: the ability to reason. However, despite the advantage of reason, rational beings should not be the only beings that are ?ends in themselves?. I view all beings as having an end in themselves, including animals. However, I see animal experimentation and sacrifice as a necessary means for human survival. Moving to Mill, his idea of pleasure and pain has possible strong points in that pain is attempted to be reduced and pleasure is attempted to be magnified. This idea seems like a universal good that can be easily accepted. However, this idea is only seen as good to those who receive pleasure. The animals, for example, lose in the case of animal experimentation since they receive the bulk of the pain. Also, the utilitarian idea that you must consider the pleasure and pain of everyone and then come to a conclusion seems too difficult and far-fetched. This concept should be restricted to considering only the pleasure and pain of those directly involved, which is difficult in this case since almost all people and animals are implicated into this dilemma.

Despite the strengths of both Kant?s and Mill?s arguments, I do not believe either one is single-handedly apt to make an omniscient decision regarding the bestowing of animal rights. Kant?s policy portrays animals as the non-rational servants of man. This view could not hold up in today?s animal rights debate because it is too harsh and does not take into account the animal as having a purpose in life for its own sake. Mill?s point of view is too hedonistic, even though it aims to reduce pain at the same time. Religious authorities might even claim the utilitarian perspective to be atheist since its structure is so highly aimed at pleasure.

Finally, I ask this question to one who is totally against the slaughter of animals for any reason. If big, disgusting rats infested your house, would you round up each one and free them in the woods, or would you set dozens of rattraps around the house or maybe call an exterminator? My point is that if it doesn?t threaten you directly, you may not realize the full extent of the ordeal. Considering the seriousness of the ethical dilemma of bestowing animal rights or not, and weighing all of the opposing views, I come to the conclusion that siding with those who promote the use of animals for human benefit seems more logical and practical, despite the fact that life is lost.

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Annotated

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