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The principle of living beings

1. Introduction

Two strangers lost in a great ocean, with only but a small boat to keep them afloat. Two strangers stranded on the same boat after a shipwreck, the two do not speak the same language- rather, they are far from agreeing with one another. Instead of fighting and arguing with each other, they decide to see the other as an equal. They respect each other. And because of their respect for one another, they survive the long and exhausting trip across the ocean. After being washed ashore, they part ways. To never see each other again. This is not the story of two humans helping each other survive, but rather the story of one man and a tiger. Or as most will recognize it, the famous book: *Life of Pi*. This story may perhaps seem like a far away and impossible thought, one that we can only dare to dream of in books and films. This story begs the question for many: what makes animals so different from humans?

Now after centuries of widely accepted inequality in the world, slowly but surely, we have accepted the principle of equality as a sound moral basis for relation with fellow *humans*. Famous philosopher Peter Singer concludes the same, and gives many philosophers and readers a new question. Should we treat animals as our equal?

“Having accepted the principle of equality as a sound moral basis for relations with others from our own species, we are also committed to accepting it as a sound moral basis for relations with those outside our own species, the non-human animals.” Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* (1979)

In this essay I would like to argue as to why Peter Singer is correct in stating that we are committed to do this. Seeking to combine my three arguments and a few counter arguments, I would thus like to explain why we are in fact committed to see those outside of our own species as equal. In my first argument, I will explain how we can conclude that animals are no worthier than us when we look at the evolution and history of humans and animals. In my second argument I would like to explain how we as humans have been interfering with nature and evolution, thus seeing them as unequal, and as to why we have no moral right to do so. In my last and third argument I will show how equality has the ability to connect humans and animals more than ever. To complete this essay, I will also analyze and counter any counter-arguments that could be presented to my own arguments.

But to understand any arguments related to this topic, we have to analyze the given citation first. In his famous book, *Practical Ethics*, Peter Singer gives readers a variety of propositions as to



how we as humans should ethically make decisions and live our lives. Unlike other philosophers, Peter Singer takes a turn and also proposes ethics related to animals. In this citation, Peter Singer states that when we have accepted the principle of equality as a moral basis for interaction/relation with humans beings, we are also committed to do the same with animals, or rather, 'non-humans'. The question of how we should ethically treat one another has been a question asked since the start of humankind. Socrates, Aristoteles and Protagoras have attempted to answer this question. But so have modern philosophers, like Kant, Locke and Rawls. Each states and lives by their own idea, but in spite of the thousands of years' worth of philosophy, we have not yet found a concrete answer everyone can or desires to live by.

In this essay, as in the citation, the term 'moral basis' will be used a lot. And thus I will also have to define it for the reader. To give a concrete definition of a so called 'moral basis' on which we treat each other is very difficult. What does one view as moral? Is a moral basis needed, or do we treat each other on how we judge each other? For this essay I will define it as follows. A moral basis is the very basic premise of how we treat people. We must realize that this very basic premise only occurs when we either do not know the person very well, or when we do not dislike the person to a certain extent. I have defined it as such because we empirically see that humans and animals have the ability to throw every moral base or principle out the window when we disagree with/dislike someone to a certain extent. We can thus view this moral basis as a sort of treaty, we do not want to be treated unequally by other humans, thus we do not treat others as unequal. Of course not everyone in this world lives by this premise, but we can assume that in an ideal world this would be a general wish. Perhaps not ideal, but worth striving for.

Now that we have defined the 'moral basis', we can explain and define the quote. The quote states, in short, that we should view our relations with animals as equal. This means we as humans do not have the moral right to misuse, unjustly kill or exhaust animals, just as we have no moral right to do this with humans. This would mean that we have no right to use animals as but a tool, and that we would also have no right to misuse and exhaust their home environment. Please do note that, in my interpretation of the quote, Singer is not telling his readers to become friends or worship animals. He is only asking for equality as the moral basis for our relations and interactions with animals. If an animal forms a genuine threat to humans, we have the right (just as with humans) to 'punish' it, to eliminate the threat. Also note that in this essay I will use the general word 'animal' a lot, I would like for the reader to keep in mind that when I refer to an 'animal', I refer to a non-human animal. Only when I use the word humans am I referring to humankind.

2. An equal moral status

The first step to substantiate as to why we are committed to treat non-human animals with the same moral basis as we treat humans, is to explain how we as humans are no worthier than animals. In this first argument I would like to explain as to why, when we look at the evolution and history of humans and animals alike, we can conclude that we as humans are no worthier than animals. What most do not realize about evolution, is that when we look at the ancestors of humans and animals alike. We see the same, small, gray amoebae. In the end it all comes down to one, factually true statement: we all share the place and way we developed ourselves or were created. Whether humans and animals were created by an all-transcending god, or whether humans and animals all share the same ancestors. We were all created/born in the



same way. No worthier status was given to humans or animals and our path of evolution and success was a pure coincidence. Of course counting on an event that was pure luck to determine a worthier moral status is immoral in itself. As we as humans have never 'worked' for this luck, or even 'deserve it'. We must not also forget that evolution in itself doesn't have a certain goal. For all we know, if a certain ape species had not developed the way it had, we might all be sitting in a forest eating bananas. Humans and animals are, in a way, the same. Which means that the moral basis for relations with humans should be the same for animals, which is to see them equal.

After this first argument many might still argue that we are just too different from animals, so how could we ever see them as our equals? Animal's brains work different, they look different from us and they also have entirely different lifestyles. So how could we ever see them as our equals, or see them as a species that is 'like us'? To this statement I have a few answers. Not only do we all come from the same 'place' with the same worth, but we also share a sense of consciousness with animals. For this explanation I would like to use the work of philosopher D.C Dennett, more specifically his famous book *Consciousness explained*. In this book D.C Dennett tries to, as the reader may have guessed, explain consciousness. For this argument I will only need one section/explanation of consciousness, which Dennett argues as follows. Imagine humans have built a winetasting robot. The robot would analyze the chemical components of the wine and conclude what flavor it would have, and maybe even if humans would like that flavor. Dennett then fronts the question: would the robot be able to enjoy the wine? Even if we perfected this robot to the maximum and even if we recreated the human brain inside of the robot with circuit boards, many people would still argue that the robot obviously cannot enjoy the wine. The robot is only made out of technical components, so it cannot 'enjoy' the wine.

Just as this hypothetical robot, our brains only exists out of circuit boards filled with neurons. So, Dennett concludes, there must be some other form of consciousness that gives us the ability to truly 'enjoy' things, not just the chemical releases of serotonin in our brain, but the way we as humans have the ability to truly enjoy the things in life. The way we can enjoy wine and a good book, the way we can love other human beings with our entire hearts. Empirically we see that animals share this same emotion. Not only does it matter that animals 'come from' the same place as us, it matters, maybe even more, that animals share our ability and consciousness to truly enjoy things and appreciate life. Like how animals will start families and protect their children/partner, or how dogs enjoy playing in parks. Animals share a part of our consciousness, and are a lot more like humans than many instinctively think.

We can thus conclude that humans are no worthier than animals, and that only pure luck is now defining our widely-believed 'higher moral status', which is of course no good reason for a higher moral status. We also see that animals share the same consciousness as us, and are thus not so different from ourselves. This argument brings us a step closer to substantiating why we as humans should also accept the principle of equality as a moral basis for relations with non-humans, just as we do with humans.

3. Natural instinct

In this second argument, I will explain how we as humans have been interfering with nature and evolution, and as to why we have no moral right to do so. For this we will need another book which contains a fantasy that might not be too far away. In the famous science fiction book



Columbus day, we follow a group of humans through a galactic war. The citizens of the earth find out that the galaxy has for a long time contained numerous other, more advanced, civilizations. This is, of course, a science fiction book. But the possibility of there being more life in the galaxy that we do not know of is very high. Now I would like the reader to imagine something else, something that might sound a little too simple to be realistic, but something that will help in substantiating my position. Imagine that, maybe tomorrow or in a few years, we find out that there are many foreign galactic civilizations out there in the universe. Imagine that, maybe for the sake of power or maybe for the sake of evil, a certain civilization has been holding humankind back from developing/evolution. Sabotaging equipment or even murdering those who help develop our technology, the way of sabotaging does not matter. The majority of people would be angry, because a higher civilization holding us back is not fair to us. So then, why do we conduct the same actions against animal civilizations?

We as humans tend to see nature and its tenants as lesser worthy, as unequal to ourselves. And to protect this feeling of supremacy and this scheme of power over non-humans we misuse and exhaust nature. Now doing so more than ever. And to this, we have to ask ourselves if we even have the moral right to do so. To this I answer that we have the right to *use* nature, but not the right to *exhaust* nature. Humans need nature to survive, so of course we have the right to use it. But in the modern day of technology and wastefulness we have switched over to *misusing* nature. No one worked for the world, and thus no one has the right to misuse and destroy it. With destroying this nature, we are also sabotaging evolution and development of animal species. Instead of this, we need to learn how to share and care for the world, to guarantee survival for all species. For example, the famous philosopher John Locke states a principle for taking and sharing the components of nature. If we follow principles like this, that ensure the survival and equality of every species. It would become more than possible to live in peace and solidarity. We as humans would not want to be held back in development, and thus we should not hold other species back in development. We are no different from a foreign alien species sabotaging the earth, and thus we are just as guilty of sabotaging species and misusing nature. Humans have thus had no right to oppress animals and see them as unequal, we should thus accept the principle of equality as a moral basis for non-human animals.

To this one could argue that is it only natural for humans to want to 'overpower' other species in evolution, it is only a natural instinct for humans to fight to get on top of the food chain, or to try and guarantee survival. This I cannot deny of course, some natural instincts are deeply rooted into humans, and wanting to guarantee individual and collective survival is something that should not be discouraged. A natural instinct to survive is after all, only natural. But what we have to realize, is that now that we as humans are more than ever aware of our status and power in the world plus our abilities to overpower species. We should also be more than capable to realize that this argumentation is nothing but a natural fallacy. Just because something is inherently natural, does not mean that something is inherently right. Our instinct to overpower is natural, but that does not mean we should condone it or view it as ethically right. Human survival is now more guaranteed than ever in history, and accepting the principle of equality as a moral basis for relations with animals will lead to no change in that guarantee. As also seen in my other arguments: this aggressive and hostile approach to non-human animals we as humans have is not just. As written in the famous book *Life of Pi*: 'It is through humankind's predatoriness, that we have made the entire world our prey.'



We can thus conclude that we as humans have no right to misuse and exhaust animals and their environment, even if this instinct to overpower is 'natural'.

4. Connecting through equality

In my last and third argument I will explain how equality has the ability to connect humans and non-human animals more than ever. Which will thus explain why we not only have the obligation to treat animals as our equals, but will also show why accepting the principle of equality as a moral basis for relations with non-humans would be a true favor for the world. Many humans tend to see animals as less worthy, because of their differences or habits. But mostly because we as humans simply do not *understand*, animals. We can try and empirically explain their habits and relations, but without (most) animals being able to properly communicate with us, we simply will not be able to truly understand them. But what we have to realize, to truly try and see animals as our equals, is the fact that equality brings all living beings closer together than any universal language ever could. Respecting one another and seeing others as equals contains more meaning than any worldly words ever can. We see this take place with people from different countries who do not speak the same language, with pets and humans, and with animals among themselves. Respecting each other and seeing all as our equals is the key to live in peace and consensus with all species on our planet.

For this argument I would also like to share a personal example and experience, in which I found that no communication is needed to respect one another and become closer. My little brother has CHARGE-syndrome, and as a result of this he now has no sight, nor does he have any hearing. Me and my brother have no way of properly communicating; I cannot tell him how I feel, nor can he tell me how he feels. Despite this, a lack of communication has not stopped me and many others to treat my brother as an equal. This equal treatment of him, and his returned equal treatment to me, has ensured that we are able to live together in harmony. No shared or universal language could ever bring me and my brother closer together than our respect for one another would. The same can be said for many other humans, but also animals, that we have no way of properly communicating with. Humans and animals alike recognize and appreciate respect more than words. It is the end of course the action that shows, instead of words.

With this we can conclude that the communication barrier between animals and humans is a false reason for seeing animals as unequal, as equality can bring humans and animals together better than any language could.

5. Conclusion

In this essay I discussed and argued as to why we are committed to accepting equality as a moral basis for relations with those outside or own species. In my first argument, I argued and concluded as to why we are no worthier and/or different from animals. In my second argument, I argued and concluded as to why we as humans have had no right in our exhausting and misusing nature, and why we thus had no right as viewing animals as unequal. In my third and last argument, I argued and explained as to how equality can bring living beings closer together than any universal language would. Thus refuting the claim that a lack of communication is a false reason for seeing animals as unequal. In the end, it is of course universal equality we all long for. And with equal and fair moral basis for all living beings on earth, we are one step closer to living in harmony with the planet and her tenants.