

Eating animals¹

Normative ethical theories are intended to guide us in knowing and doing what is morally right. It is therefore very useful to consider theories in relation to practical issues, in order to understand the theories and their implications better. The primary purpose of this handout is to think about how three normative theories - utilitarianism, Kantian deontology and Aristotelian virtue ethics - would respond to the practical issue of eating animals.

UTILITARIANISM

Act utilitarianism, in its simplest form, says that an action is right if it maximises happiness, and wrong if it does not. Bentham was aware that his identification of happiness - understood as pleasure and the absence of pain - as the only good has some radical implications. One is that animals are morally important. The question about who or what to consider when looking at the consequences of our actions is not 'Can they reason? nor, Can they talk? but, Can they suffer?'

Utilitarianism says that happiness is good, not just that the happiness of humans is good. If happiness is good, then it is good no matter what creature feels it. There is nothing in the theory that gives us a reason to privilege human happiness over the happiness of non-human animals. So it seems that the logic of utilitarianism requires us to take as much account of beings that are not human as of human beings.

This line of thought has been more recently developed by Peter Singer in his book *Animal Liberation*. We do not think that it is right to treat women worse than men just because they are women (this is sexism), nor to treat one race worse than another (this is racism). Likewise, it is wrong to treat animals as unequal just because they are not human. This is 'speciesism'.

We can object that with women and men, and different races, there is no difference in those important capacities - reason, the use of language, the depth of our emotional experience, our self-awareness, our ability to distinguish right and wrong - that make a being a person. But there is a difference between human beings and animals with all of these.

Singer responds that these differences are not relevant when it comes to the important capacity that human beings and animals share, namely sentience, the basic consciousness needed to experience pleasure and pain. For a utilitarian, an act (or rule) is wrong if it produces more suffering than an alternative. Who is

¹ This handout is based on material from Lacewing, M. (2017) *Philosophy for AS and A Level: Epistemology and Moral Philosophy* (London: Routledge), Ch. 3, pp. 327-332

suffering is irrelevant. When it comes to suffering, animals should be treated as equal to people.

Does this mean that eating animals is always wrong? Not necessarily. First, there is the question of whether stopping the practices of farming, slaughtering and eating animals would reduce the amount of (animal) suffering in the world more than it would increase (human) suffering. It may seem obvious that it would, but the point must be considered carefully. Second, the utilitarian position only objects to suffering, not to killing. Although it can seem very strange to think about it in this way, if you painlessly kill an animal and bring another animal into being, you haven't reduced the total amount of happiness in the world. According to Singer, we need only ensure that animals are happy when they are alive, and slaughtered painlessly. This would make eating meat much more expensive, because animals would have to be kept in much better conditions. Eating meat is only wrong when animals are not treated as well as they could be. The way in which we rear animals for food at present means that eating meat is wrong.

KANTIAN DEONTOLOGY

Kant argues that we should 'Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law' - his 'Categorical Imperative'. In other words, we should act only on maxims that it is possible for everyone to will. 'Everyone' here refers to 'everyone with a rational will'. On this, Kant argues that there is a sharp distinction between human beings and animals. Animals do not have a rational will. They have desires, but to have a will is to be able to stand back from one's desires and reflect on whether or not one's desires are good and whether or not to act on them. And so it seems that any maxim that concerns how we treat animals can be universalised. In particular, there is no contradiction, either in conception or in the will, in universalising the maxim to eat meat.

We find the same result when we turn to the second formulation of the Categorical Imperative, which states 'Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end'. Because of our capacity for practical reason, human beings are ends in themselves. We have a rational will and can adopt ends. This is the only thing that is unconditionally good, and for everything else that is good, its goodness depends upon being adopted by a will. Animals are not rational wills and are therefore not ends in themselves, and can therefore be treated as means to our ends. We may therefore eat them.

Despite these results, Kant argued that we may not treat animals in any way we want. He starts from the idea that we have the duty to others (and to ourselves) to be virtuous. We have a duty to protect and develop our ability to have a good will and to do our duty. He then argues that if we lack kindness towards animals, we may become unkind towards other people - and this would be morally wrong. Therefore, we need to treat animals in such a way that we don't damage our own abilities to be virtuous. So while we have no duties to animals, we do have duties concerning animals, but these are indirect duties to ourselves and other people.

We can object that Kant's theory is very counterintuitive, and fails to account for what is wrong about treating animals badly. Instead of saying that harming an animal is wrong because of the harm done to the animal, Kant says it is wrong because of the harm done to ourselves.

Second, we can note that babies also aren't rational or autonomous (yet) and neither are some people with severe mental disabilities. Can we treat them as means to an end, or do we have moral duties towards them? We may argue that we do, because babies have the potential to become rational wills, and will do so if cared for. But this argument doesn't work for people with severe mental disabilities - they will never develop a rational will. If we have duties to them, and yet these human beings do not have different psychological capacities from certain animals, then to deny those animals similar moral consideration would be speciesist, it seems. Whatever is the basis of our duty of care towards people with severe mental disabilities, we may argue, should equally give us a duty of care towards animals.

ARISTOTLE, DIAMOND AND VIRTUE ETHICS

According to Aristotle, we aim at eudaimonia, the good for a human life. It is often translated as 'happiness' but Aristotle says it is 'living well and faring well'. Virtues are traits that help us achieve this. However, animals have no share in eudaimonia, Aristotle argues, because they are incapable of either practical or theoretical reason. Our primary concern with eudaimonia has little place, therefore, for the consideration of animals.

However, more recent virtue theorists have argued that this is mistaken. A different understanding of the relationship between human beings and animals provides arguments for greater concern. There may well be ways of treating animals that are not virtuous. Although she doesn't phrase it in terms of virtue, one philosopher whose approach has much in common with virtue ethics is Cora Diamond.

Diamond, 'Eating meat and eating people'

Diamond argues that eating meat is often wrong, but that arguments about speciesism fundamentally misunderstand ethics. If we start from the idea that we must consider the suffering or happiness of animals and human beings equally, we misunderstand what is important in our relationships with both animals and with other human beings. We can see this by looking at some examples.

First, we don't eat our dead. This isn't because we think it will cause them suffering (they're dead!) or because killing them for food would violate their rights (although it would). It is because a person is not something to eat. That is not true of animals - many animals are 'things to eat'. It is notable that Singer doesn't dispute this, but doesn't notice its significance. He thinks there is nothing wrong with a vegetarian eating a cow that is accidentally killed by lightning. Second, on the thinking of speciesism (equal concern for happiness of human beings and animals), there is no moral difference between having sex with a person of a different race and having sex with a (consenting) gorilla. Yet that is obviously not how we think about people and animals. An animal is not something to have sex

with. The capacities of human beings and animals don't explain why we treat human beings and animals differently. Speciesist arguments are unconvincing because they don't recognise why we do treat people and animals differently.

We don't raise people for meat. We don't number children, but give them names. We celebrate babies being born and people getting married and we give people funerals. We don't do any of this for animals. This isn't because all these practices are in the interests of human beings, but because these practices form part of what it is to recognise a human being as the kind of being to be treated with moral concern. Our relations to other people in marking birth, sex and death as serious and important inform the concept of 'human being'. And so does the idea that we owe them moral duties. Moral duties aren't the result of the interests of a particular species of animal, homo sapien. Moral duties partly constitute recognising that animal as a human being. It is this recognition, not the thought that we shouldn't make some being suffer, that is the source of moral life as such. If we are to show that eating animals is wrong, we cannot do so by trying to eradicate the difference between human beings and animals that define those very concepts.

So what reason is there to be vegetarian? We must first recognise that there are many different practices in eating animals, and some may be wrong while others are not. For example, rearing your own pigs, looking after them well and killing them humanely for yourself is very different from picking up sliced pork in the supermarket. To state the obvious, the meat industry is an industry, with animals reared, slaughtered and shipped around the world on an industrial scale, and many of the things that are done to animals in the process are done not because they benefit the animals, but to make the process more efficient.

There are many ways we feel towards animals, and teach children to feel towards animals, that are in conflict with how we treat them in the meat industry. For example, animals feature heavily in nursery rhymes and other stories; we feed birds and squirrels; we stop children from harming pets and respond with horror if they are cruel to them. These emotional responses and behaviours towards animals reflect the idea that we and they are 'fellow creatures', not in the sense that we are biologically similar, but in the sense that we are all 'in the same boat' as living creatures. Like human beings, animals can die, they lead their lives without our knowledge of what they do, they can provide company for us. These thoughts recognise and respect the independent lives that animals have.

While it is a normal part of thinking of animals as fellow creatures that we eat them, it nevertheless also enjoins us to rear them well or hunt them fairly. But it conflicts strongly with thinking of them as simply part of the production of meat. That way of thinking strips them of respect. We might compare it to thinking of human beings as slaves. In both cases, our capacity to treat the other as independent and to respond with pity and fellow-feeling to how their lives are going is diminished. Animals appeal to our sense of morality not by an assertion of equal interest but by appeal to our pity, to not be callous in how we treat our fellow creatures. This appeal does not try to obliterate the difference between people and animals, but recognises how people may respond to animals.

We can see the basis of Diamond's approach in virtue ethics in these last points about pity. Just as ethics is grounded in the 'good life' for human beings, we recognise - through our emotional responses to other animals - that they share with us the capacity for lives that go better or worse. Not to be emotionally responsive to this is to display the vice of callousness; to treat animals purely as a means to our own ends displays selfishness. As Diamond's examples of rearing one's own pigs or hunting them fairly show, killing animals for food may be morally permissible, if it is done for the right reason and in the right way, i.e. with the appropriate feelings. Because that is so often not the case, eating animals is often morally wrong.