

Singer's argument for animal equality

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Singer's Argument for Animal Equality This paper is the result of feeling that Singer's argument for animal equality in his paper 'All Animals are Equal' deserves to be taken more seriously than it often is. What I try to do is identify Singer's essential argument and then defend it against some objections I have come across. The 'irrelevance argument' Singer begins by assuming that the 'principle of equality' or 'principle of equal consideration of interests' is a basic moral principle. The principle says 'treat all people as equals', meaning 'give equal consideration to the interests of all people', or 'treat the interests of all people as equally important', regardless, for example, of their skin colour, or gender, or sexual orientation. So racism, sexism and homophobia are violations of the principle of equality; they are practices that 'discriminate' so as to favour the interests of one group of people over those of others. In fact another title for the principle might be the 'principle of non-discrimination'. Singer then proposes that we should 'extend' or 'reinterpret' the principle of equality so that it applies not just to all humans but to all sentient beings, by which he means all beings that are capable of suffering or happiness or enjoyment (from here on I shall just say 'suffering or happiness' for short). So the principle becomes 'treat all sentient beings as equal' or 'give equal consideration to the interests of all sentient beings', regardless of which species, or which group within a species, they belong to. Singer gives three kinds of advocacy to support this extension of the principle of equality, of which only the third is a real argument. First, he says that extending the principle to include non-humans is an 'expansion of our moral horizons'. The implication is that our present moral outlook is somehow narrowly self-centred because it focuses (almost)

exclusively on the human race, and we should adopt a more universal standpoint. But this assumes that a more universal standpoint is better than a more particularistic one, that a 'wider horizon' is better than a 'narrower one', and Singer does not say why we should think this. So this is not yet an argument. Second, he points to the succession of modern liberation movements that have demanded that the principle of equality be extended to black people, gays and women, and been largely successful in those demands (in that almost everyone today agrees that the principle of equality should apply across all those different groups, even if actual practice often does not match up to that). This is not an argument as such either, but it suggests that this historical extension is not just a matter of chance or just the result of socio-economic changes (such as the development of the division of labour), but rather that it is the result of the human race following out a certain 'logic of universality'. The further extension of the principle of equality to all sentient beings would simply be taking this logic to its final conclusion. You might think that Singer is relying on a very small slice of history here, namely the last two or three hundred years in the West, but one can argue that this process of universalisation has occurred over a longer time-span in the West, for example in the successive interpretations of the idea that you should 'love your neighbour as yourself' in the Bible. This command first appears in Leviticus, where God gives it to Moses. From the context it is clear that 'neighbour' means either 'someone who lives near you' or 'a member of your own people'. The full verse is: You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the Lord. (Leviticus 19: 18) In

fact a little later in the same series of commands God explicitly prohibits the Israelites from enslaving each other, while advising them to enslave members of other peoples (Lev 25: 44). Several hundred years after Leviticus was written, Jesus endorses the command to love your neighbour as yourself, but when he is asked 'And who is my neighbour?' he answers with the story of the good Samaritan, saying that it is the foreigner who helped the mugging victim, rather than his two fellow countrymen who ignored him, who proved to be the man's real 'neighbour'. From what I know it seems that Jesus's statement was not unique; it was symptomatic of a tendency towards more universalist ways of thinking in first century Judaism. [1] This universalism becomes more explicit in the early Christian church. For example, St. Paul writes: There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3: 28) Of course Paul is only referring here to Christians, and when Paul calls on his congregations to 'love' it is generally to love one another as fellow-Christians. But it is clear that the principle of loving one's neighbour as oneself has been extended beyond its original nationalist context. No doubt Singer would be able to point towards similar development towards universalism in the histories of other religions. But even if Singer is right that all moral codes include a basic principle of equality, that in the course of history this principle tends to get extended more and more widely, and that there is some kind of 'logic' to this process, still he has not yet said anything about what this logic is, nor given us any reason why we should take it beyond the human race. So this second form of advocacy again does not really constitute an argument. Singer's third form of advocacy is a real

argument. As I understand it, it goes like this. The principle of equality as we currently interpret it says that we should give equal consideration to the interests of all people but says nothing about animals. Now suppose the rationale for this limitation is that humans are much more intelligent than animals, then this is inconsistent with the principle of equality itself, for if we reflect on that principle as we interpret it currently, it says that the interests of all people should have equal consideration not only regardless of their race or gender, but regardless of how intelligent they are. For example, we would not agree with the idea that the interests of more intelligent people should be favoured over those of less intelligent ones, or that suppose it were found that one group of humans was more intelligent on average than another then the interests of that group should be favoured. But if the principle prohibits unequal consideration on the basis of different levels of intelligence within the human race, then it must prohibit unequal consideration on that basis between humans and non-human animals. Or, as Singer puts it: If possessing a higher degree of intelligence does not entitle one human to use another for his own ends, how can it entitle humans to exploit nonhumans? The refusal to extend the principle of equality to non-human animals on the grounds of their lower intelligence is therefore inconsistent with nature of the principle of equality itself. It can only be based on an arbitrary prejudice in favour of the human species. If instead the rationale for limiting the principle of equality to humans is not their superior intelligence but some other feature (say rationality, or the ability to use language, or self-consciousness, or the capacity to act for moral reasons, or the capacity to form a conception of their lives as a whole), then Singer will apply exactly the same argument.

Let us call this argument the 'irrelevance argument'. To put it in its most general terms, for any distinctively human feature X which is supposed to justify treating the interests of humans as more important than those of non-human animals, the argument says 'The principle of equality treats the presence or absence of X as irrelevant to the question of how the interests of any two humans should be weighed against each other, so logically it must treat the presence or absence of X as irrelevant to the question of how the interests of a human and a non-human should be weighed against each other.' We can now make better sense of Singer's first two kinds of advocacy for extending the principle of equality. The idea that extending the principle to non-human animals 'expands our moral horizons' and involves us in taking a more universalistic standpoint can be buttressed by the idea that this more universalistic standpoint is demanded by the nature of the principle of equality itself. For the principle has a universalism built into it from the start in that it demands equality of consideration for all humans regardless of their particular features, and this intrinsic universalism ultimately demands that the principle should be extended to non-human animals. Since the principle of equality is a basic principle of morality, it follows that morality itself demands this extension. In the same way, the idea that the historical story that Singer tells about the progressive extension of the principle of equality to wider groups of humans has some kind of 'logic' can be filled out by saying that this logic of extension is a logic built into the nature of the principle of equality, and thus into the very idea of morality, from the start. For even if a morality initially takes a tribal form, let's say as the demand that I must help any other member of the tribe when

they are in danger, this 'any' must ultimately undermine the limitation of the principle of equality to the tribe. For if I have to help any person who is a member of my tribe then the person's particular features are irrelevant to whether I must help them, and eventually I am bound to draw the conclusion that the particular feature of 'belonging to this tribe' is equally irrelevant.

Once we go beyond a purely self-interested standpoint to a moral one, we are bound to adopt some version of the principle of equality, and the logic of universality inherent in this principle drives us inexorably to include larger and larger groups within the constituency of those we owe moral duties to, until eventually it includes the whole human race, and this is what has been happening throughout history. Singer is just taking the whole process to its logical conclusion by extending the moral constituency to all sentient beings.

Clarifications At this point we need some supplementary clarifications of Singer's position. First, what is the empirical basis of Singer's irrelevance argument? Does it depend on the idea that for any supposedly distinctive feature of human beings, there is some 'overlap' between humans and non-humans, i. e. that we can find some human beings who have this feature to a lesser degree than some animals? He does assert that there is such an overlap, referring to: the existence of some humans who quite clearly are below the level of awareness, self-consciousness, intelligence, and sentience, of many non-humans and of course the existence of an overlap helps Singer to embarrass people who want to find a basis for treating humans differently from animals. But I don't think it is strictly necessary to the 'irrelevance argument'. Take the idea that superior intelligence is a good basis for putting the interests of humans above those of non-humans,

and suppose that it was empirically true every single human being was more intelligent than every single non-human animal. This fact would not affect Singer's irrelevance argument, as long as he can claim that the principle of equality says that the relative intelligence of two human beings is irrelevant to how we should weigh their interests, for (he will say) if it is irrelevant for such comparisons within the human species then it must be irrelevant for comparisons between humans and non-humans. Someone might say that this example relies on the fact that intelligence is a matter of degree not an all-or-nothing feature but. So let's take instead the idea that the capacity to act morally (which, let's assume, is an all-or-nothing feature) is a good basis for putting the interests of humans above those of non-humans, and let's suppose it is empirically true that every single human being has this capacity and no non-human animal has it. Again this fact will not affect the irrelevance argument, as long as Singer can claim that if a human being were born without this capacity the principle of equality would say that this person's interests should be considered equally with anyone else's. For then again he will say that if the presence or absence of this capacity is irrelevant for comparisons within the human species it must also be irrelevant in cross-species comparisons. Second, where does he think the extension of the principle of equality must stop? What are the boundaries of the 'moral constituency' (the constituency of all those beings to whom we owe moral duties)? If non-human animals are included, then why not insects, or plants, or even inanimate structures? Singer's answer is that the principle of equal consideration of interests must apply to every being that has interests, and since all and only sentient beings can have interests it must apply to all

sentient beings. So plants are not included because they are not capable of suffering or happiness. Likewise presumably bacteria and the lower kinds of animal. Third, what do a being's interests consist in, and what does it mean to 'consider every being's interests equally'? Singer says little about this, but he does say that all and only sentient beings (beings that can suffer or be happy) have interests. This suggests that he understands 'what is in the interests of a being' to mean 'what will in some way reduce its suffering or make it happier', for if you have that definition of interests then it automatically follows that only beings capable of suffering or happiness can have interests. However this does not mean that all kinds of being have the same interests, for he says that what counts as suffering and happiness can differ from one kind of animal to another. He says: the distinction between humans and nonhumans is not a sharp division, but rather a continuum along which we move gradually, and with overlaps between the species, from simple capacities for enjoyment and satisfaction, or pain and suffering, to more complex ones. So while every being capable of suffering or happiness has corresponding interests that should be considered equally with those of every other such being, they are capable of different complexities of suffering or happiness, and correspondingly the content of their interests may differ dramatically. For example, he says that 'Since a pig can't vote, it is meaningless to talk of its right to vote'. I think the point is not just that pigs are incapable of voting, but they have no interest in being able to vote, i. e. being able to vote would not contribute to their lives being happy ones, whereas it would for humans. And the underlying reason for this is that a humans' capacity for happiness is more complex than a pig's, and

so to be happy a human needs certain things that a pig does not, such as some control over the way his or her own society is run. Accordingly, as Singer says, to consider the interests of humans and members of some other species equally 'does not imply that we must treat both groups in exactly the same way, or grant exactly the same rights to both groups'. What it means is that the different interests of pigs and humans, based on the different requirements they have in order to live happy lives, should be treated as equally important. If the idea of equal consideration of interests is implemented in terms of rights, then what this must mean is that every being should have right to those things that it needs for some minimal level of happiness, and because humans need more to be happy than pigs do this will mean more extensive rights for humans than for pigs, but that is quite compatible with treating the happiness of a pig as no more or less important than the happiness of a human. Fourth, how does self-interest fit into Singer's picture? At first sight the principle of equality seems to make everything that you do for yourself (or for your children, or friends) immoral, for it means favouring one person's or one group's interests over everyone else's, but surely this is crazy? Singer doesn't address this explicitly, but I think what he needs to say is that the principle of equality is not a first-order moral rule for judging the rightness or wrongness of individual actions, but second-order moral principle for judging first-order moral and legal rules. This is what is meant by calling it a 'basic principle of morality': it provides the basis for particular moral and legal rules. It does not demand that everyone in every act give equal consideration to the interests of all, but that every moral and legal rule of society should give equal consideration to the

interests of all. It can be seen as a development of the principle of 'equality before the law' (the principle that laws must apply impartially to all) so that it applies to moral as well as legal rules and so that it calls for impartiality with respect to the interests of each individual. For example, if I use my earnings to support my own children I am not giving equal consideration to the interests of other people's children, but a general moral rule that says 'everyone should use their earnings to support their own children' gives equal consideration to the interests of all children. I have to admit there is a problem here, because it looks as if I am saying that the principle of equality allows for all kinds of discrimination in favour of groups you belong to. For doesn't it mean that, for example, the rule 'everyone should employ people of their own gender (or race or sexual orientation)' is allowed by the principle of equality? The answer must be that if both genders were equally well off then this rule would not violate the principle of equality; it would just be a bit narrow-minded. But in a situation where one gender has a systematic advantage over another in terms of satisfying its interests this kind of partiality sustains the advantage and so does violate the principle. That is why wouldn't object to a company owned by women making a policy of employing only women, but we would object to a male-owned company making a policy of employing only men. Also there must be limits to the partiality that the principle of equality can allow. Given a situation in which all groups are equally well off, it can allow a rule that everyone favouritise members of their own group, but not if this means violating the basic interests of any other group. Objections Are Singer's arguments obviously mistaken? I don't think so. Here I would like briefly to take up a few of the

objections I have seen made to them, in the light of the above reconstruction of his position. A basic objection is that the whole framework of Singer's discussion is utilitarian, and there is something deeply wrong with utilitarianism because on the one hand it demeans our existence by saying that the only thing of ultimate value in it is happiness, and on the other hand it gives an account of morality as the maximising of total happiness, which allows the sacrifice of the happiness of a minority for the sake of the majority. This is really two different objections: one to Singer's account of value (that it reduces all value to happiness) and another to his account of morality (that it makes the end justify the means). I think both are ultimately mistaken. The objection that he has a maximizing theory of morality is mistaken because, whatever maximising views Singer may express in other works, the irrelevance argument in this paper does not depend on a maximizing account of morality at all. It depends on the 'principle of equality', which as we normally interpret it is an anti-maximizing principle. I know that one can find an interpretation of the principle of equality that would make it into a maximising principle: namely 'the satisfaction of each person's interests is to count as much as that of every other person's in adding up the total amount of interest-satisfaction in society, and moral and legal rules should be such that they maximise that total'. But this is an extremely strained interpretation of the principle. For example, if we say that men's and women's interests are to be considered equally then as we would normally understand it this means that women's interests cannot be sacrificed for the sake of men's (even if that sacrifice could lead to an increase in the total interest-satisfaction in society). Singer's invocation of

the idea of treating each other as ends rather than means in connection with the principle equality suggests that he does not interpret it as a maximizing one, but even if he does the irrelevance argument does not need such an interpretation. The objection that Singer has a demeaning account of value has already been mitigated by pointing out that according to Singer happiness in a human consists in something far more complex than it does for a lower animal. But we can go further and point out that the irrelevance argument does not depend on the idea that happiness is the ultimate value in the world. It depends on the principle of equality, which does not talk about value but only says that all sentient beings interests should be considered equally. One can say that from the point of view of morality it is the equal consideration of interests that matters, and that the interests of a being are in whatever will reduce its suffering or make it happy, and yet say that there are other things of value in the world apart from the satisfaction of individual interests — for example things of aesthetic value. This leads to another objection, which is that even if we distinguish value from the satisfaction of interests, making the interests of a being consist in whatever will reduce its suffering or make it happy gives too minimal an account of what a sentient being's interests are. For if that is all a being's interests consist in then we can happily slaughter animals for food or experimentation as long as we can find some way of doing it that causes no suffering and does not detract from their happiness. If that is right then Singer's irrelevance argument, when combined with his view of interests, does not do as much for animal welfare as it seemed to. I think the straightforward response to this is that life is the necessary condition of happiness, and to

kill a sentient being — no matter how painlessly — is automatically to deprive it of the very possibility of happiness in the future, so it does detract from its happiness. Finally, there is the objection that Singer has misunderstood way the principle of equality works. The principle of equality treats rationality (say) as irrelevant in making comparisons between any two members of the human race, because they belong to a rational species. It is your membership of a rational species that qualifies you as a member of the moral constituency, and once you are qualified your individual rationality is neither here nor there. I think Singer's response would be simple: either rationality is a basis for discrimination or it isn't. It is arbitrary to say that it is a basis for discrimination between species but not between individuals within species, unless one has already established that a species boundary has some moral status. But that is exactly what Singer is contesting. After all, he might say, in biology two populations are classified as belonging to different species if they cannot interbreed with each other so as to produce fertile offspring. How can the fact that one stands on one side or the other of such a purely biologically defined divide have any significance for one's moral status? Some afterthoughts (Following the discussion of this paper at the Sussex Undergraduate Philosophy Society, October 2005) 1. Why understand interests in terms of suffering and happiness? Maybe because if the principle of equality is to be made to apply across all non-human species then we need some common standard by which to compare the interests of one kind of animal with those of another. But since Singer insists that what counts as happiness for different species is very different it is not clear that it does provide a common standard. We would have to know what happiness

consists in for every species to be able to consider interests equally. 2. If some people are no more sentient than non-human animals then their capacity for happiness is no more than an animal's and their interests are correspondingly no more complex, so on Singer's 'complexity of happiness' view they need no more extensive rights. E. g. a very mentally disabled person does not need a right to vote. So the result of Singer's argument seems to be to downgrade the status of some human beings. Here the 'complexity of happiness' view seems in tension with the principle of equality. You could go farther and say that very musically talented people should have a right to free musical instruction but not others. One possible response to this: you could say that the principle should always be that a right should be extended to any being that can benefit (in terms of satisfying its interests) from that right, so that really a musically incompetent person has no right to musical instruction and really someone unable to make any choices at all has no right to vote, but that the general pragmatic rule should be to offer rights to a wider group than those who can benefit from them so as to catch everyone in the net, assuming that those who can't benefit will not take them up, and species (and gender) boundaries are convenient places to stop. 3. More generally, doesn't Singer's admission that different species have capacities for different complexities of happiness, and thus need more or less extensive sets of rights so as to be able to meet their interests, vitiate his basic idea of the equality of all animals, since we end up with a hierarchy of more and less extensive rights for different species? Singer might agree, but point out that there is still a basic equality here that puts his position a million miles from ordinary moral views about humans and animals. For

despite their different complexities of happiness, the happiness of every sentient being depends equally on its being alive, and therefore every sentient being has an equal right to live. Therefore a human's life is worth no more and no less than any other sentient being's. Here there really is equality. 3. Isn't it 'natural' to favour your own species? Singer might say that morality is always 'unnatural' to the extent that it tells us to restrain or redirect certain natural impulses. This is what we have to do with every child. The real question is whether this restraint will be such as to cripple us in some way, and there seems no reason why being restrained from using animals as means to our ends should be more crippling than being restrained from using other humans as means. He might also say that to call something 'unnatural' is often simply a covert way of expressing our current moral outlook, e. g. for a long time the equality of women was considered 'unnatural'. 4. How do you draw the boundary between sentient and non-sentient? Singer's response might be that this is something to be worked out in practice, as with every moral boundary. 5. But isn't there something arbitrary about stopping at the boundaries of sentience? Singer seems to make it tautological that the principle of equality can only apply to sentient beings, but this is only because he has tacitly defined 'interests' in terms of happiness and suffering, so that only sentient beings can count as having interests. Why couldn't a tree have an 'interest' in growing and flourishing, as opposed to being cut down and sawn up? Perhaps the only way to respond to this is by appealing to the idea that it is the possibility of putting yourself in the place of the other and empathising with it, that is the real ground of morality, and such empathy can only make sense if the other is

capable of suffering or happiness of some kind. It is another question how this idea could be made to fit with Singer's irrelevance argument. 6. Doesn't the principle of equality as interpreted here mean that people in rich countries can't look after their own children, since 'looking after your own children' sustains the gap between rich and poor countries and so to huge disparities between the degrees to which people's interests are met in those countries? Perhaps the response is that by itself the rule of looking after your own children makes an insignificant contribution to global inequality. It is the structure of the international economic order that is chiefly responsible for this. 7. Doesn't it mean that animals can favour the interests of their own species against humans? If we discovered a non-human animal species that could act for moral reasons then we might raise this question. Until then it is moot, for moral approval and disapproval is not relevant to non-human animals. 8. Haven't equal rights always been won by struggle by the oppressed, not by enlightenment within the oppressors? This objection is directed to Singer's historical story rather than to the irrelevance argument, so of course one response might be to drop the historical story. But Singer might instead insist that in the end the reason that the gains made by the oppressed have been maintained is because those gains only make explicit something to which the oppressors were morally committed from the start (though they did not realise it). A struggle for animal equality would of course have to be carried out by humans on behalf of animals, so the element of moral argument would have to be central, but it has always been an element in the success of earlier struggles. 9. What if I am attacked by a wolf in the wild? If the principle of equality says I have a right to kill it in self-

defence I that is the only way to save my life, just as I would if it were a man, then isn't it being unfair to the wolf, for the man could have chosen not to attack me and the wolf couldn't? This seems to be a reductio ad absurdum of the principle of equality. A possible response: the problem is that the man here has to be thought of as a moral agent as well as a moral constituent whereas the wolf is only the latter, and in this light the man's death seems somehow less bad than the wolf's since it is a fitting punishment for attacking me. But strictly in terms of their interests neither is really made any worse off than the other by the rule of self-defence. 10. Isn't there something basically wrong with the principle of equality itself? It seems to require that moral and legal rules be such that everyone comes out equally well off by living under them, and that is an impossibility. A response might be that it doesn't need to be interpreted so strongly, that is as 'equality of outcome'. But then we would need a less strong interpretation that would still capture the basic idea of treating all persons as equals, and Singer might say that no matter how we end up by formulating the principle the irrelevance argument will still work. 11. The irrelevance argument looks as if it is based logically on the principle of equality. But in fact it relies on a certain interpretation of how that principle would apply in hard cases, which in turn relies on certain moral intuitions. This is then used in order to overturn other common moral intuitions. Thus our intuition that the life of a human with no more capacities than a cat's is worth as much as any other human's is used to overturn our intuition that a human's life is worth more than a cat's. Yet why should the former intuition be allowed to trump the latter? Of course Singer might say 'Fine, if you are really prepared to

abandon the former for the sake of keeping the latter'. ----- [1]

[Note added January 2008:] See J. D. G. Dunn, ' Was Judaism particularist or universalist', in J. Neusner and A. J. Avery-Peck (eds.) *Judaism in Late Antiquity, Part III: Where We Stand: Issues and Debates in Ancient Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 1999)