

# Morality towards animals kantian vs utilitarian

Experience, Human Nature



Historically, there has been some debate between Kantian and Utilitarian philosophers on the moral status of animals. This great debate over whether or not moral consideration should be granted to non-human animals deserves to be rectified at some point. Many argue that there is a resolution to this debate that can be used via a distinction between the two to clearly distinguish human beings from all other animals on the planet. But, as shall be shown in this paper, the evidence thus far for such a distinction is seriously doubtful at best. Unfortunately without such a distinction, it becomes increasingly difficult to argue, with a straight philosophical face, that non-human animals should be afforded less than equivalent moral considerations to that of human beings. After all, if no meaningful distinction between human beings and non-human animals, then we ultimately are arguing from an uncertain position that says one group should receive better treatment than the other. This paper shall examine the debate over this issue, primarily through Kantian and Utilitarian perspectives, and hopefully enlighten the problems in both positions, though particularly the Kantian one. Although the Utilitarian position on the issue of moral concerns for non-human animals is far from perfect, it represents a more justifiable position than the Kantians.

It's not surprising that many of the people who argue are the very same people who are most interested in justifying and continuing practices towards non-human animals that cause pain, suffering and death to non-human animals (Gruen, 2003). Often the welfare opposed to the rights of non-human animals is more widely accepted which can often confuse the debate in question. People tend to argue that humans unlike animals have

characteristics that clearly distinguish the differences those of which include rationality, autonomy, moral agency, language capability, free will and self-consciousness among others (Garner, 2010). Interestingly, Act Utilitarian's believe that regardless of human beings and non-human animals, any action toward these is only permissible if it follows the balance of pleasure outweighing pain (Garner, 2010). Not all claims can say as much. The hope, no doubt, is that philosophical wrangling can justify and absolve them of practices that are largely recognized to be cruel and harmful to non-human animals. Unfortunately for the groups still largely oblivious to the moral considerations for non-human animals, we find that there is no meaningful way, morally or philosophically, to separate humans from non-human animals. The result, in the hopes of being intellectually consistent, is that we need to give consideration to the suffering and moral position of non-human animals equally, as we would also do for human beings.

Of course, supporters of the above position immediately argue that there is a clear division between human beings and non-human animals based on speciation alone. In this belief, we might give moral consideration to a fellow human being, but a cow or chicken? A chicken for instance, is not considered a human being (for those who have doubts) and cannot lay claim to the species-specific moral considerations that humans enjoy according to this claim. But, for the philosopher, membership in one species over the other is of utmost irrelevance, especially when considering morality. It is, in essence, considered a non-issue if we cannot in-turn provide evidence for why such species differentiation translates into a differing of moral consideration (Garner, 2010). Ultimately it would be like arguing that any 'accident of

birth' is reason enough to deny certain individuals moral concern: perhaps leaving out entirely all women, overweight people, short people or Japanese people. The division between human beings and non-human animals must be demonstrated on some other plain other than purely biological grounds. In as such, many have turned to the idea that human beings differ due to their possession of abilities that are unique to our species and that are concrete us firmly in place to that of the rest of the outside non-human world.

But, it seems that this argument has fallen flat too. As stated in Gruen (2003), " human behaviour and cognition share deep roots with the behaviour and cognition of other animals". There have been numerous examples in the non-human animal world of behaviours that are very similar, if not identical to behaviours that most humans would consider to be ' uniquely human'. In any socially complex non-human animal species, there is evidence of what one would consider to be altruistic or familial behaviour. Family ties are often seen in many of the primate species. Primate mothers often stay with their offspring for extended periods of time. Singer (2009) notes that not only do humans have intelligence and language comprehension, but so do great apes, border collies and grey parrots. A famous gorilla named Koko has scored between 70 and 95 on human IQ tests as well as being able to understand approximately one thousand different signs. In addition, Alex the African grey parrot was able to grasp more than a hundred words and was able to answer novel questions presented to him on top of being able to understand basic concepts involving shapes and colours (Singer, 2009). Evidence exists of Meerkats who will risk

their own safety to stay with family members who are ill or injured (Gruen, 2003). The usage of tools is also common in the non-human animal world, as is the ability to understand symbolic representations, the basis for language. Some non-human animals even possess some of humanity's less pleasing cognitive abilities, such as the ability to engage in manipulative or deceptive behaviour (Gruen, 2003). The sum of this evidence is not to argue that non-human animals are identical to humans but rather it is to show that the unique behaviours and abilities that we as human beings cling to are actually found throughout the non-human animal kingdom as well, albeit in less complex forms.

Some philosophers have turned to metaphysical characteristics as a way to draw the line between the human and non-human animal worlds. Kant puts forth one of the most notable examples of this position. Kant's argument is based on the idea that humans are distinguishable from the non-human animal world by power of their personhood and are thus morally considered. In his 1785 Groundwork, Kant proposed that:

Every rational being, exists as an end in himself and not merely as a means to be arbitrarily used by this or that will [...] Beings whose existence depends not

on our will but on nature have, nevertheless, if they are not rational beings, only a relative value as means and are therefore called things (Kant 1785, 428 as quoted in Gruen, 2003).

Essentially what Kant believed is that the rational ego of human beings distinguishes us from all other non-human animal life. In less distinct terms, a human being has the capability of seeing himself not only as an individual, but as a rational being able to differentiate the world that grants personhood to human beings and thus affording them moral consideration. What Kant is trying to say is that human beings are rational whereas non-human animals are not. With that being said, Kant believes that “irrational animals may be dealt with and disposed of at one’s discretion” (Kant, LA, 7, 127 as quoted in Gruen, 2003). Kantians argue that it is the ability of human beings to question the source of their desires rationally that separates humans and animals. Whereas the non-human animal is focused only on its sensory perceptions, human beings are not only able to perceive, but question the very nature of their perceptions. According to Kant and his followers, this rational ability is the very reason we can justify relegating non-human animals to a lower moral position.

As is obvious, there are problems with the Kantian position. Beyond the realization of an artificially imagined separation between man and beast (which is after all, the point in question), Kant’s position on the matter embarrassingly has difficulties with the matter of what is considered ‘marginal humans’, or human individuals that do not possess Kant’s “rational capacity” that is a prerequisite for personhood. As understood by many and supported by Singer (2009), there are some humans that fall under categories of mental retardation. For instance, the mentally challenged would have to be excluded from moral consideration by Kant’s logic, as they are incapable of expressing rational self-awareness that his personhood

demands (Gruen, 2003). Singer (2009) demonstrates that some people with profound mental retardation have IQ's lower than 25; have an ability to understand that exceeds their ability to speak and may only have the capacity to follow basic directions, and yet these people would certainly never be passed over for moral consideration. Whereas, dogs, horses, dolphins and pigeons have been trained to follow basic directions and perform useful work, have IQ's over 25 and have an ability to understand that which exceeds their ability to speak, are.

Kantians have responded to this concern in a variety of ways; as human beings, we could consider our behaviour towards these marginal individuals as indicative of our own moral sense. Or perhaps, these individuals, because they possess the capacity to become rational individuals, must be treated with the same moral consideration as all other human beings. But, by far the strongest response to the Kantian position comes from the Utilitarian's, who reject rationality outright as a marker of moral consideration just as we have already rejected other supposedly unique human attributes (Garner, 2010; Gruen, 2003).

Utilitarian's argue that the only moral consideration worth considering is one that focuses on promoting happiness and the satisfaction of individual interests, and reducing suffering and interest frustration (Gruen, 2003). Jeremy Bentham was one of the strongest supporters of this position on moral concern. He wrote in 1781:

Other animals, which, on account of their interests having been neglected by

The insensibility of ancient jurists, stand degraded into the class of things [...]

What else is it that should trace the insuperable line [between humans and nonhuman animals]? Is it the faculty of reason, or perhaps, the faculty for discourse? [...] The question is not, Can they reason? nor, Can they talk, but, Can they suffer? (Gruen, 2003).

According to the Utilitarian position, our moral concerns for non-human animals should be extended as far as the animal's capacity to suffer and experience pain in all the ways they are capable of suffering. With the rise in populations, the need to provide mass quantities of food has created an animal's nemesis. Factory farming is the most common method used to produce food for human beings, and it is done at an alarming rate. An estimated 8 billion animals in the United States are born, confined, biologically manipulated, transported and ultimately slaughtered each year in methods that create great amounts of suffering (Gruen, 2003). This position has been highly defended by modern Utilitarian's who continue to argue that there is no morally justifiable way to separate humans from non-human animals when non-human animals are clearly capable of suffering. Any being capable of suffering should have its interests taken into account and should be granted the same moral consideration regardless of being human or non-human.



Sometimes the Utilitarian position is mistaken for more of an animal rights position than a morals position. Although both positions are similar, the animal rights position believes that there is no circumstance under which an animal should be subject to the will and whim of human beings. As Garner (2010) points out, the animal rights position is more for the equality between the species. One thing to note, however, is that this is not entirely the Utilitarian position. In regards to the Utilitarian's belief that non-human animals should not suffer and be extended moral consideration, the Utilitarian's also believe that the same would be extended to a human being. But the Utilitarian position allows for the satisfaction of the greater good in all moral matters. If, for instance, more good is done than harm by a particular action, then the Utilitarian would take up the position that the action is morally justifiable. A simpler way of perceiving this is that the Utilitarian could morally justify killing human or non-human animal, if it would save the lives of two other people. Ultimately, the Utilitarian's goal is to always reduce harm and suffering, but they unfortunately (when it comes to non-human animals) are not vegetarians. Utilitarian's believe that " If an animal lived a happy life and was painlessly killed and then eaten by people who would otherwise suffer hunger or malnutrition by not eating the animal, then painlessly killing and eating the animal would be the morally justified thing to do" (Gruen, 2003).

Seemingly it seems that there are some good and some bad to both positions. Take for example the Kantian position; Emmanuel Kant did not support cruelty towards non-human animals, he just believed that they did not warrant the same moral considerations that human beings do. According

to Kant, non-human animals were non-rationally thinking creatures and thus not afforded moral consideration but, he did argue that for the human beings that cause unnecessary suffering to animals. Kant believed that non-human animals were subject to the will and whim of human beings but that when they were put to work for us, they should not be strained beyond their capacities, he also believed that human beings had the right to kill non-human animals as long as it was done quickly and without pain (Kant & Gregor, 1996). In essence, Kant felt that although non-human animals did not merit moral consideration, human beings had some type of a duty to them.

Clearly, like the Kantian theory, the Utilitarian approach of moral concern for non-human animals is not without its own flaws. The Kantian argument fell apart because of a false distinction between human beings and non-human animals. The Utilitarian's, base the fate of individuals and their relative happiness on a type of mathematical equation. Though contrary to some degree, at least on the question of extending moral concern to non-human animals, the Utilitarian's recognize that there is no meaningful distinction at play between human beings and the rest of the animal kingdom. In this regard, the Utilitarian's will always win out in this philosophical debate, at least for this author. Basing an arbitrary distinction between human and non-human animals just to justify cruelty and suffering is utterly beyond defence from a moral perspective. To ignore suffering because it challenges human beings imagined superior position in the world is not acceptable.

Where, then, does that leave the argument of whether to extend moral concern and consideration to non-human animals. Clearly this author rejects the unsubstantiated evidence for drawing a distinct line between human beings and non-human animals, but cannot quite accept the extreme Utilitarian position that all matters of moral concern can be written like an equation. Perhaps it would be wise to investigate the work of other philosophical theories, such as ecological feminists, who argue that the entire approach to the issue is flawed because it fails to grasp the institutional culture of dominance upon which our actions are built (Gruen, 2003). Within this larger context, both the Kantian and Utilitarian positions can be seen as justifications (to vastly different degrees) for a culture that projects its will onto the entire world with dominant force. The bigger question for future consideration of this issue is to not simply question whether or not non-human animals are deserving of the same moral considerations that are granted to human beings, but whether or not human beings have moral authority in the first place to dictate such concerns and arbitrarily impose their will on the rest of the world.