

The Problem of Suffering

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Abstract

In this essay, I take the stance that it is morally acceptable to use non-human animals for human ends, and I outline a moral structure which supports this when the relationship between the human and the non-human at the point of infliction of suffering meets certain criteria. I start off by identifying some problems with Peter Singer's Utilitarian approach which cannot really be resolved adequately without accepting that it is inevitable that we cause suffering. I then refute the assumption that suffering is bad and should be minimised, arguing, using examples, that suffering can be beneficial when one's life is morally or spiritually enriched by it. I examine some dimensions of the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator of suffering, which is often overlooked. Finally I suggest that perhaps a more sound basis for assessing suffering is whether our connection with the victim is enriched or deepened and, via this experience, our connection or embedment in the World. The problem with this approach is how to make available to others the individual's experience of enrichment or embedment.

2,300 words

Peter Singer's Position on "Speciesism"

If he was answering the question "Do only humans matter?", Peter Singer (1979) would clearly be saying, no; other beings matter as well. To Singer, when we ignore the suffering of battery chickens or laboratory victims, we are guilty of an act of Speciesism - privileging our species over another without any defensible reason (Singer: 48).

Singer denies the relevance of the species boundary in defining our moral community and sets up instead the boundary of sentience - the ability to feel pleasure and pain. Sentience gives a being the moral right to be considered significant. If a being is not sentient, it does not suffer, so it's death or mutilation does not affect the overall level of suffering in the world.

Singer takes a classic Utilitarian position in considering whether an action leads to an overall increase or decrease of suffering in the world. This follows the classical Utilitarian stance that the aim of all moral action should be to bring about the "greatest happiness of the greatest number" (Jary & Jary: 685).

Problems with Singer

I will concentrate on three interrelated problems with Singer's position.

First, there is a logical weakness in Singer's position regarding the setting of boundaries of our moral community. If we accept that using the species boundary is indefensible because "our concern for others ought not to depend on what they are like, or what abilities they possess (Singer: 49)", on what basis do we accept the sentience boundary? The categorisation of sentience requires us to yet again make an assessment of a being's ability, this time their ability to suffer. This raises exactly the same moral problem Singer seeks to overcome by highlighting the indefensibility of speciesism.

Second, in discussing the case of Eskimos, who must kill animals to eat, Singer says they "might be justified in claiming that their interest in surviving overrides that of the animals they kill (Singer: 55)". Although he cautiously says Eskimos "might" be justified, he is allowing that the moral weight of a human claim to survival can be greater than an animal's claim to survival. Surely this is in itself another act of speciesism - privileging the actions of one species over another.

Third, in drawing the line of sentience, how does Singer do it? "Animals in pain behave in much the same way as humans do, and their behaviour is sufficient justification for the belief that they feel pain" (Singer: 60). Very well, but how do we know that a plant is unable to feel pain? We can only know the plant's perception of life through the filter of our own. If we cannot share or sympathise with the plant's perception because the biological distance between us and the plant is too large, does that give us the right to then assume the plant has no experience of suffering?

In making the statements quoted above, Singer is drawing lines which allow us to use other beings for our own ends while at the same time not contradicting the moral injunction to minimise suffering. This is indeed a laudable objective; if we say that all beings and even things like rocks can suffer, how can we possibly justify eating anything, let alone clothe and house ourselves? Implicit in this question is an assumption about suffering; "pain and suffering are bad and should be prevented or minimised" (Singer: 54). I propose that this widely accepted statement should be challenged.

Contradictions about Suffering

Suffering is an integral part of our experience of being alive. All of us die, and most of us suffer in the process. Our relatives suffer grief upon our death, and sometimes that suffering can be so great that people die from it. All of us are born and our mothers usually go through considerable pain, and occasionally death, to bring us into the world.

An argument exists which says that the suffering occasioned by birth and death are "functional needs" of humans, and not really events over which we have any control. Yet it could be argued that suffering in childbirth could be reduced by reducing the number of babies being born, since our population is increasing. We do not have a functional need to increase our numbers; it is a matter of accident, choice and social values. Yet this is never an argument used for zero population growth. It is simply accepted that some suffering is inevitable and there is no attempt made to reduce it, even though it could be reduced and therefore, according to the Singer position, should be reduced.

Another approach to this problem could be to say that overall suffering is not increased through a birth because the suffering is offset by the production of the child, or that the prevention of the birth would cause greater suffering to the child. In the case of the birth of a person who is born severely defective, this is clearly not true since it leads to continual suffering of the child and sometimes its parents as well.

Getting away from the dramatic nature of birth and death to more mundane situations such as accidents leading to enforced convalescence, we hear time and time again that accident victims go through a change of life or change of perspective which would not have happened but for the accident. Sometimes the victim will even say "I am glad I had this accident". Studies of people who have had near-death experiences, often experiencing the most incredible physical suffering, find a high percentage who have had profound changes in values and life direction as a result, and are thankful they have gone through that experience (Sutherland, 1992). It is also not unknown that the mother of a severely retarded person is fierce in her defence and caring for her child, and will sometimes explicitly state she is thankful for the child's birth.

These life events of birth, death, injury and near-death involve sometimes great suffering to the point of death, yet it is possible for the participants to experience them as profoundly valuable and to be thankful they occurred. How can this fit with our assumption that suffering should be minimised?

The Experience of Suffering

I believe that our approach to suffering is woefully inadequate and, as a result, we as a society lose out on the boundless riches which suffering and death can bring. It is certainly true that for every person who experiences a major life event such as near-death or serious injury as a positive enhancement to their life, there is another person who experiences it as a horror which they would not wish on their worst enemy. The problem with suffering is not the suffering itself, but our relationship with it.

Rather than looking at the quality and extent of the suffering, a judgment should only be made on the basis of the sufferer's experience of the suffering. The sufferer can ask themselves: Is my life enriched by the experience of that suffering? Do I feel more connected with my soul, essence or beingness as a result of the suffering? Is my capacity for feeling, for empathy, for connection with others, enhanced through the experience? Is my humility in the face of the vast unknowable increased some measure? If the answers generally are "yes", then the suffering is positive and should be supported.

The Infliction of Suffering

So far I have examined the situation of a human victim experiencing suffering themselves. I have shown that in certain circumstances it is not possible to say that suffering is bad. This directly contradicts the stance that a victim's suffering is bad and should be avoided. But how can this be applied to a perpetrator of suffering?

If we accept that all other beings suffer when killed, then we will, by virtue of us simply being alive, cause suffering to other beings. Even if we as individuals are able to avoid directly causing deaths, our agents the forest workers, the farmers, the miners, and the engineers are doing so on our behalf. The question becomes not: is it OK for us to cause suffering in other beings, or even should we seek to minimise suffering but rather, WHEN we cause suffering, what basis should we use to judge its moral acceptability?

At this point I have to discuss a crucial aspect of the action of causing suffering; that of the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator. This relationship is often overlooked; the slaughterman has only a fleeting interaction with the cow as he shoots the bolt into its head, the log faller is more concerned with his personal safety and that of his equipment than the fate of the tree. Nevertheless a relationship exists, which the perpetrator can shape as they wish. Even in the study of homicide - a human killing another human, criminologists recognise that "homicide is a collective transaction. An offender, a victim and possibly an audience engage in an interaction which leaves the victim dead" (Polk, 1994; 3).

I suggest that the criteria for morally acceptable perpetration of suffering should be similar to that which makes the experience of suffering rewarding, but with an important addition. It is not possible for anyone to know the experience of their victim, but the perpetrator must consider their relationship with the victim: Do I feel more connected with the soul, essence or beingness of the dead being as a result of the interaction at the kill? Is my capacity for feeling, for empathy, for connection with others, enhanced through the experience? Is my humility in the face of the vast unknowable increased some measure?

Problems with Relational Approach

This approach, what I will call the Relational Approach, focuses on the personal experience of the killing. It is of course a radically different basis for a moral system compared to accepted values. Nevertheless there is only one major problem with it, and that of only a technical nature. Our current understanding of ourselves and our acceptance of the ethic of individualism inhibit our ability to make those inner

experiences available to others in a form which is acceptable and reliable. Western moral codes rely on externally imposed values primarily focusing on externally observable actions.

Let me demonstrate this by taking an example relevant to our subject, a person may kill their dog in a fit of pique about an entirely separate issue, and subsequently regret their action and mourn their dog so strongly that they devote the rest of their life to helping dogs. Assuming we accept my proposal we may ask some pertinent questions. Does this long-term outcome justify the action? If they helped dogs for only some weeks or even days, is this OK? The problem with these two questions is that they focus on the person's actions, rather than their experience. The actions indicate to us that the person is deeply affected, but actions are not always a reliable guide.

This raises the question of how we are to assess another person's experience. Assuming that the dog-owner was hauled before a court to answer a charge of (say) Causing Unenriching Suffering, what sort of court would it be? How would the laws be expressed? What sorts of court procedures would be used to get at the person's experience? What would witnesses for the defence say? How would we know whether the person was just making it up, that they weren't simply a vivid storyteller? Such questions show us clearly that we are not practiced at identifying and sharing what one may call spiritual/emotional experiences as if they are solid bits of Life. But this does not reduce their validity as a basis for a moral code.

Conclusion

In terms of this essay, the Relational Approach resolves all three problems identified in Singer by valuing all beings equally irrespective of their characteristics and by revisiting the values around the infliction of suffering. It accepts implicitly that suffering is part of life, that we constantly cause suffering to ourselves, other humans and other beings, and it seeks to approach suffering in terms of the enrichment it brings to our lives.

Due to space restrictions, I have only been able to outline some immediately apparent problems with the Relational Approach. There are of course many other difficulties which arise because the Relational Approach is so far from current social mores and conventions of understanding the individual. In that, it could be said to be a Utopia, rather than a practical approach to the problem of suffering. However I believe that it has some validity in the discussion of ethics because it envisages a society which is universally sensitive to all beings and ultimately compassionate - a very different picture from our current social reality, but a highly desirable goal.

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