The Differences Between Singer, Regan, and Francione

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"There are said to be three main theorists in modern animal ethics - Singer, Regan and Francione. Could you explain the significant differences between the three?"

Singer is a utilitarian thinker, for whom morality is a matter of providing the greatest possible utility, pleasure, or happiness for the greatest number of morally significant beings. Singer's eighteenth-century predecessor Jeremy Bentham answered the question which beings are morally significant when he observed that the key to moral status is not whether a being can think or use language but whether that being is capable of suffering. In doing so, Bentham challenged the conventional wisdom that only human beings are morally significant: To the extent that many animals are sentient (i.e., they can experience pleasure and pain), the interests of these animals must be taken into account in our considerations of which courses of action are morally obligatory. This approach to moral questions outwardly appears to hold the promise of extending equal consideration to the interests of animals. But Bentham goes on to suggest that death is less of a harm to animals than it is to human beings, and that therefore it is morally permissible for human

beings to kill and eat animals; indeed, Bentham goes so far as to state that animals who are killed by human beings for human consumption are actually better off than animals who die a natural death (which presumably includes the prospect of being killed by predation).

Singer does not reject any of Bentham's premises but instead refines them. According to Singer, like Bentham before him, non-human animals cannot contemplate the distant future and therefore have essentially nothing to lose by dying; animals have an interest in not suffering, but they do not have an interest in continued existence. Therefore, even though Singer considers practices such as factory farming to be deplorable, he believes that there is no absolute moral requirement not to eat animals; in *Animal Liberation*, he states that he can respect people who eat meat only from animals who have been humanely raised and have been killed painlessly. In effect, Singer makes a basic distinction between human beings and non-human animals: the former are individuals, whereas the latter (at least those lacking capacities such as self-consciousness) may be treated as replaceable resources. Human beings are capable of greater suffering (and presumably of greater happiness) than animals because human beings can conceptualize and contemplate pleasures, pains, projects, and events whereas animals cannot. Thus while the utilitarian starting point acknowledges that the interests of animals must be taken into account alongside the interests of human beings in the moral calculus, Singer's utilitarianism sketches a hierarchy of morally significant beings in which the interests of human beings are given a privileged place over those of animals.

Tom Regan takes an absolutist or deontological approach according to which all beings possessing certain cognitive and experiential capacities should be recognized to

possess inherent moral worth. Regan takes his cue from Immanuel Kant, who argues that inherent moral worth is worth that is absolute and inviolable and has nothing to do with capacities for pleasure or pain. Certain beings, simply in virtue of their essential nature, merit absolute moral respect and should never be treated as mere means. For Kant, all and only rational beings possess inherent worth and merit absolute moral respect; all and only those beings who can contemplate the moral law and the idea of inherent worth are themselves beings who possess inherent worth. Thus for Kant non-human animals possess no inherent worth but instead are mere "things" with instrumental value, whereas rational beings are "persons" with full and direct moral status. For Kant, the only moral worth animals possess is indirect: We should refrain from treating animals badly not because they possess moral worth in themselves, but simply because treating animals badly makes us more likely to treat human beings badly.

Regan follows the general terms of Kant's "absolutist" or "deontological" approach to ethics as well as Kant's critique of utilitarian thinking. But Regan seeks to refine Kant's approach by challenging Kant's supposition that only rational beings possess inherent moral worth. Kant's mistake, on Regan's view, is in supposing that one must be a rational agent in order to have full and direct moral status. Regan argues that the scope of direct moral concern properly includes moral patients as well as moral agents: Moral status depends not on the ability to contemplate abstract moral rules and the idea of inherent worth, but rather on the capacity to be a "subject-of-a-life." A being is a subject-of-a-life if it has beliefs, desires, a sense of the future, an emotional life, the ability to act in pursuit of goals, and "a psychophysical identity over time." In other words, any being for whom life is meaningful, even if it is not meaningful in the same ways in which it can

be meaningful for human linguistic-rational agents, is a subject-of-a-life and possesses inherent moral worth.

Regan's approach outwardly appears to hold the promise of recognizing the moral status of animals to be equal to that of human beings: He argues that if animals and humans each possess inherent moral worth, then there is no basis for attributing different moral value to human beings (moral agents) and animals (moral patients). But Regan ultimately posits the same sort of moral hierarchy posited by Bentham and Singer. He argues that moral status is a function of the opportunities for future satisfaction a being possesses. Equal inherent value confers merely a *prima facie* right not to be harmed. This right is overridden in cases such as Regan's lifeboat scenario, in which several human beings and a dog are in a lifeboat and one individual must be thrown overboard in order to save the others. Given, Regan argues, that each of the humans has greater opportunities for future satisfaction than the dog, it is the dog who unquestionably should be sacrificed. Moreover, the number of dogs has no bearing on the outcome; it would be appropriate, Regan believes, to sacrifice even a million dogs to save one human being in such circumstances. Like Singer, Regan finds practices such as factory farming deplorable for the gratuitous suffering they inflict on animals; and while his approach seems to hold greater potential than utilitarianism to consider the interests of animals equally with those of human beings, Regan ultimately has recourse to a very traditional moral hierarchy that privileges human beings over animals, at least in cases of perceived conflict between the interests of the two.

Gary Francione takes elements from both Singer's and Regan's approaches and argues for a deontological or absolutist standpoint that dispenses with moral hierarchies

altogether. Like Singer, Francione argues that sentience (the capacity to experience states of pleasure and pain) is the sole appropriate criterion for moral status. And like Regan, Francione argues that moral worth is inherent, which is to say that it is shared equally by all beings possessing the requisite experiential capacities. But unlike both Singer and Regan, Francione argues that the level of cognitive sophistication a being possesses is completely irrelevant to considerations of moral status. Either a being is sentient and therefore possesses absolute inherent moral worth equal to that of all other sentient beings, or that being lacks sentience and therefore has no moral status whatsoever. Unlike Regan, who argues that being a subject-of-a-life is sufficient but may not be necessary for moral status (e.g., there may be beings without consciousness that have moral status on some other grounds, such as mountains or ecosystems), Francione argues that sentience is both necessary and sufficient for possessing direct moral status; Francione believes that sentient beings can be harmed in ways in which non-sentient beings cannot, and he believes that there is no non-arbitrary basis for privileging the interests of one kind of sentient being (say, one that is rationally more sophisticated) over the interests of another.

Francione argues that all sentient beings merit equal consideration of their interests along with the consideration of the interests of other sentient beings. Thus the interests of a dog must be considered equally with those of any human being. This does not mean that the dog must be treated exactly the way we treat human beings; for example, equal consideration of a dog's interests does not mean that a dog has a right to vote or to obtain a driver's license. But it does mean that we must consider the dog's interest in not suffering equally with any human being's interest in not suffering. Moreover, we must recognize something that neither Singer nor Regan appears to

acknowledge: that, in addition to an interest in not suffering, every sentient being has an interest in continued existence. Death is as great a harm to an animal as it is to a human being, hence there is no basis for arguing that the life of a human being possesses more moral worth than the life of a non-human sentient being.

Francione examines an emergency scenario in order to draw out the conclusions of his position. If we are confronted with a burning house in which we can save either a human being (say, your child) or a dog, Francione argues that there is no principle according to which the human ought to be saved rather than the dog. We might well save the human being rather than the dog; but this would be because we identify more immediately with the human than the dog, not because the human has more of a right than the dog to be saved. Moreover, Francione is at pains to point out that the vast majority of situations of conflict between human and animal interests are *not* of this "emergency" nature; and yet we treat all such cases of conflict as if they were emergency situations, thereby rationalizing the subjection of animals for the sake of satisfying human desires.

Francione argues that the only way to ensure the equal consideration of animal interests and the avoidance of the traditional moral hierarchy that privileges human beings over animals is to abolish the legal status of animals as property. Animal interests will never be considered equally with human interests as long as animals are classified legally as property, a classification that has its origins in the Christian and Lockean view of human dominion over animals. The abolition of the property status of animals brings with it obligations far beyond the elimination of practices such as factory farming. It entails the complete abandonment of all uses of animals as instrumentalities for the

satisfaction of human desires: all killing of animals for human consumption, all raising of animals as sources of clothing and other materials for the satisfaction of human desires, and all uses of animals in experimentation and human entertainment. Francione's abolitionism goes so far as to entail the cessation of all domestication, including the regime of pet ownership, on the grounds that such practices fundamentally treat animals as subject to human dominion. In calling for the complete cessation of such practices, Francione's abolitionist standpoint is directly opposed to welfarism, which argues that certain uses of animals are perfectly permissible as long as we treat the animals well in the course of using them. Welfarists seek to justify practices such as animal experimentation and the slaughter of animals for human consumption provided that these practices are carried out humanely. Francione argues that such practices are inherently inhumane and fundamentally incompatible with the equal consideration of animal interests alongside the interests of human beings.