Basis Of Animal Ethics, Focusing On The Idea Of Speciesism

Question:

‘With reference to at least one case study, critically discuss an environmental ethic of your choice’.

Answer:

James argues that to study environmental issues we first need to address the philosophy behind them (James 2005, p. 9). Therefore, this essay will open by looking at speciesism throughout history and consequently the arguments of both Singer and Regan on animal ethics. Exploring Singers utilitarian approach to the treatment of animals and subsequently Regan’s deontological view on animal welfare. Also addressing some of issues attached to each style of ethic. This essay will also look at the ways in which Singer and Regan’s arguments are applied to the issue of factory farming, touching on the sudden spike in veganism seen in society today. Overall, this essay will argue that both Singer and Regan should be celebrated for their contribution to the theory of animal ethics.

The concept of animal ethics can be traced back to the idea of speciesism defined by Singer as a 'prejudice or attitude of bias in favour of the interests of members of one's own species and against those of members of other species' (Singer 2002, p. 6). This idea is prominent throughout history as we see through philosophers such as Aristotle who coins animals as a form of ‘lower soul’. We also see this in the belief in many religious teachings for example in Hinduism they believe in reincarnation, claiming that if you lead a less virtuous life you will come back as an animal. In Islam this speciesism is also prominent as seen in the sacrificing of animals at the end of Ramadan. However, it is also clear that such concern towards this issue of speciesism and animal welfare can be seen in ancient times such is present in the works of Pythagoras, who is deemed ‘the first vegetarian’ (Bulmer, 2014). Nevertheless, concern has definitely come in waves. One important wave came in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as many European philosophers, sought to outlaw practices involving animals that were thought to be cruel. This was due to the surge in experiments such as vivisections in the enlightenment era. Another important wave came in the middle of the twentieth century. This wave was primarily concerned about the growing number of modern farming practices. Most likely due to the Post World War Two boom in industry and the need for more ‘meat’ for a growing population. Ruth Harrison was one of the first thinkers to address this issue in her work Animal Machines (1964).

Singer, inspired by the works of Harrison wrote Animal Liberation in 1975, which many claim launched the modern animal rights movement. Singer goes as far to liken the tyranny on animals with that of white humans over black humans (Singer 1975, p. 30) Singers work is defined under a utilitarian ethic, emphasising the idea of maximising pleasure and minimising pain. He accepts that animals may indeed not be able to rationalise the way humans can. However, looking at the works of Bentham, Singer adopts the idea that animals can indeed

suffer. Singer's argument states, since all sentient beings have the ability to suffer, it follows that they have specific preferences and interests, specifically for not feeling pain (Singer 1990, p.50). Singer's position therefore is one which argues for equal consideration of humans and animals, however not necessarily equal treatment. We can see this problem in the following dilemma from Singer: 'If we do not reject the belief that it is wrong to kill severely intellectually disabled humans for food, then we must reject the belief that it is all right to kill animals at the same level of mental development for the same purpose' (Singer 1993, p. 306).

For many people this controversial idea discourages them from supporting Singer's argument, claiming he grants too much weight to the interests of animals. This idea that human beings and their interests are no longer more important than non-human interests is radical and uproots the thoughts of many conventional theories.

However, some thinkers may disagree with Singer and claim that the ethic of utilitarianism actually promotes the mistreatment of animals in the form of animal agriculture and therefore Singer contradicts himself. The meat industry is big business. Therefore, if that industry were to shut down, there would be many detrimental effects to the economy and employment. Suggesting that perhaps when all matters are taken into account, not just the environment and animal welfare, the costs of closing down the meat industry may cause more harm to society. Therefore, diminishing Singers utilitarian argument as in practise it may support the continuation of the meat industry, rather than its abolition.

Consequently, due to its basis in utilitarianism, Regan becomes frustrated with Singer's argument. Within the confinement of this theory, Regan claims the individual lacks any 'independent value on its own' (Regan, 1983). According to Regan, this situation leaves animals extremely vulnerable to a range of harms. Regan questions what happens when the rights of humans and others come into conflict. For example, in the case of a circus elephant, the audience may be huge and gain an enormous amount of pleasure from watching the show. Therefore, according to Singer's argument the pleasure of the many would outweigh the rights of this elephant. Thus, Regan agrees with Mill that utilitarianism can easily be corrupted, as only the majority are listened to.

Regan adopts a deontological approach to animal ethics which is the view that animals, like men are "ends in themselves" (Kant, 1903) and therefore ought not to be exploited. Regan is more radical than Singer and calls for the total end to commercial animal farming, all hunting and trapping of animals, all animals' experimentation and the eating of animals (Regan, 2004). Claiming the treatment of animals in the whole system of society is fundamentally and intrinsically wrong. Regan, following a Kantian style ethic claims that animals have an 'inherent value', which belongs equally to those who are experiencing subjects of a life. However, he disagrees with Kant's anthropocentric view on inherent value only applying to rational beings; as Regan stretches this concept to all sentient beings. However, Kant did support the claim that the mistreatment of animals is a vice and can easily lead to the same mistreatment of humans (Regan 2010, p. 162). Regan therefore believes that within society we have a role to educate. Regan deals with moral dilemmas between human and non – humans with three principles. The first being the minimize – overriding principle. The second the worse off principle and the third the respect principle.

However, scholars such as Jamieson also highlight issues with Regan's theory. When given the situation of 'the lifeboat case', where either a dog or a human is thrown overboard, Regan

admits the dog should be thrown overboard. Claiming that this is how we should act according to the worst-off principle. Stating ‘death for the dog… though a harm, is not comparable to the harm that death would be for any of the humans’ (Jamieson 1990, p. 10). This moral dilemma therefore limits the integrity of Regan’s basis on inherent value. It also weakens Regan’s abolitionist position on animal experimentation as surly this lifeboat analogy would justify the suffering of one non – human in order to safe many humans. For example, in the case of pharmaceutical testing.

On the subject of commercial animal agriculture, both Singer and Regan take an abolitionist position. They claim that within factory farming the fundamental moral wrong here is not that animals are kept in stressful and confined environments. These properties are simply effects of the deeper, systematic wrong of society which allows these animals to be treated in this way: as a renewable source. For both Singer and Regan, giving farm animals more space does not right the fundamental wrong in their case. Nothing less than the total dissolution of commercial animal agriculture will work (Matheny 2005, p.21). Singer discusses the issues of consuming meat and factory farming, claiming that the pleasure humans gain from eating meat and the suffering animals face from being killed do not hold equal weight. Singer claims that the human interest in eating meat is only trivial on the bases that humans can lead perfectly healthy lives without eating meat. The animal interest in not suffering, on the other hand, is major. Singer then claims that the principle of equal consideration of interests does not allow for major interests to be sacrificed for trivial interests, and thus that maximum satisfaction would be achieved by the abolition of factory farms (Singer 2015, p. 253).

In 2019, we have seen a sudden boom in interest towards our environment and the devastating impacts that factory farming brings. Lymbery, chief executive of Compassion in World Farming exclaims that “Every day there is a new confirmation of how destructive, inefficient, wasteful, cruel and unhealthy the industrial agriculture machine is. We need a total rethink of our food and farming systems before it’s too late” (Lymbery, 2019). Via social media we are now easily able to see the devasting backstory of the food on our plates, leading to many people being more eco-conscious on where their food is coming from. Lymbery also exclaims that “The crops fed to industrially reared animals worldwide could feed an extra four billion people on the planet” (Lymbery, 2019). This westernised want for animal flesh therefore has devasting impacts on food crises in third world countries.

However, the idea of leading a healthy lifestyle and interest in the health of the environment is most definitely on the rise, specifically in the middle class of wealthy countries. This is prominent in the surge of veganism in many countries such as the UK, US, AUS and Western Europe. Veganism has been coined the ’fastest growing market’ with a quarter of 25- to 34-year-old Americans claiming to be vegans or vegetarians (Parker, 2019). In 2019, America’s largest milk company ‘Dean Foods’ filed for bankruptcy (Licea, 2019). Reinstating the growing concern people have for the environmental and health issues with consuming animal products. This rise in veganism not only has environmental advantages but also economic benefits. The CEO of Greggs stated the businesses’ profits have leapt more than 50%, to £40.6m, in the first six months of 2019. Creating the “vegan halo” effect, by which companies that have embraced veganism have reaped the rewards (Godwin, 2019).

To conclude, this essay opens by addressing the basis of animal ethics, focusing on the idea of speciesism. It next discusses Singer’s utilitarian approach to animal ethics. However, also the issues many people have with his theory due to the focus on maximising pleasure. This essay

continues to look at Regan’s rights-based view on animal ethics. Also addressing the issues that come with this theory, specifically with the moral dilemma of the ‘the lifeboat case’. Overall, this essay celebrates both Singer and Regan for their substantial contributions to the animal rights movement. From raising awareness on the issues of factory farming and subsequently encouraging others to life a healthier lifestyle with a plant-based diet. Many of the ideas placed forward by both Singer and Regan are incredibly influential in issues of animal ethics today. Therefore, both Singer and Regan should be acclaimed for their input towards the theory of animal ethics.

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