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*Is it wrong to kill animals in order to eat meat?*

In this paper, I will argue that it not wrong to kill certain animals (specifically, invertebrates) in order to eat meat. I will begin by discussing the fact that certain animals (invertebrates) may have nociceptors, but do not feel pain or suffer in a morally relevant way, and therefore do not require equality of consideration. I will discuss Singer's argument on the minimization of suffering in all animals, human and nonhuman. I will to argue that Singer's argument is compelling, but has some issues, as pain and suffering are subjective. I will go on to discuss how comparing certain animals' reactions to negative stimuli to human "suffering" is often considered anthropomorphizing, and does not always accurately depict what the animal feels. I will demonstrate this using research relating to pain reception in invertebrates such as crustaceans and insects. I will discuss the paradox of minimizing suffering of all animals, as, following that rule, humans would therefore be required to stop wild animals from fighting, hunting, and killing, actions that are required for the animals' survival. I will conclude that while we are not morally required to interfere to minimize suffering of all animals (specifically, those in the wild), we, as humans, are required to treat animals humanely, especially those in captivity. Therefore, we should not kill animals in the wild or in captivity for food unless they cannot suffer. I will then discuss an objection to the idea that equality of consideration should be given to animals with the capacity for suffering, specifically one that argues pain and sentience is morally irrelevant, and animals should therefore not have moral statuses. I will reject this idea by using a hypothetical comparing animals to inanimate objects, and then someone with severe, irreversible brain damage to the same inanimate objects.

## **Suffering vs Reactions to Aversive Stimuli**

In Singer's paper, "All Animals are Equal", he argues that speciesism is a form of discrimination directly comparable to racism or sexism, and that equality of consideration should be extended to nonhuman animals, on account of the fact that they have "the capacity for suffering—or more strictly, for suffering and/or enjoyment or happiness (Singer (1974) p.571). Moreover, he states that "if a being is not capable of suffering, or of experiencing enjoyment or happiness, there is nothing to be taken into account" (Singer (1974) p.571). Suffering, the state of experiencing pain, "an unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with actual or potential tissue damage or described in terms of such damage", is a subjective term, and the only way we can determine amount of "suffering" is by comparing reactions to negative stimuli of nonhuman animals to reactions to negative stimuli of humans (Merskey (1994) p.209). Therefore, any comparison of nonhuman and human suffering will be the result of someone anthropomorphizing nonhuman animals. This is not necessarily a bad thing; nonhuman animals do react to negative stimuli, and many do react in ways parallel to humans. Take, for example, Perrin Cohen's experiment with dogs and shocking electrodes, where the shocked dogs "barked or bobbed their heads when the current was applied" (Singer (1989) p.573). The reason researchers use those actions as evidence that dogs feel pain is because they are parallel to actions from a human when they feel a shock, such as a jerk of the hand or vocalization of discomfort. Singer greatly opposes these experiments, calling it "pointless cruelty", but it is significant to note that these such experiments, whether they are cruel or not, are what prove that some animals do indeed feel pain, and that fact is what leads Singer's whole argument (Singer (1989) p.573).

However, not all animals feel pain, or at least do not feel pain in a way that is morally relevant. Excluding cephalopods, invertebrates have very small nervous systems with many ganglia, instead of a central brain, and there is little evidence they have emotions or

experience pain like mammals. Insects, for example, may experience a grievous injury and still continue their normal behavior, and “observations of their behavior do not appear to support the occurrence in insects of a pain state, such as occurs in humans. It is likely that the same could be said of other invertebrates having less complex nervous systems, though more caution would be needed in other cases, notably that of the cephalopod molluscs, which have a considerably more complex nervous system” (Eisemann (1984) p.167). Though insects such as *Drosophila melanogaster* have nociceptors like mammals, experiments seem to show that the nociceptors in insects act more as sensors to help them detect and avoid or move away from aversive stimuli, not to send more advanced signals of pain to a brain, like in a mammal (Eisemann (1984) p.166). Even bacteria have been shown to move away from aversive stimuli, but they do not have the systems required to feel pain. Therefore, since insects and other invertebrates (excluding cephalopods) are beings “not capable of suffering, or of experiencing enjoyment or happiness, there is nothing to be taken into account”, and we can kill them to eat meat without any moral backlash (Singer (1974) p.571).

### **The Paradox of Minimizing All Suffering**

In the previous section I discussed how certain animals do not have the capacity for suffering, and therefore we are not obligated to give them equality of consideration. Therefore, there are certain animals which we can eat morally... and lobster is still on the menu. However, there is still a problem with Singer’s idea of minimizing suffering in humans and nonhuman animals, a sort of paradox. Williams touches on this in his paper “The Human Prejudice”:

We are certainly in the business of reducing the harm caused by other animals to ourselves; we seek in some degree to reduce the harm we cause to other animals. The

question arises, whether we should not be in the business of reducing the harm that other animals cause one another, and generally the suffering that goes on in nature.

(Williams (2006) p.146)

“Even though much suffering to animals is caused, directly or indirectly, by human beings, a lot of it is caused by other animals”, and if we are required to minimize suffering of all animals, we would not only be expected to stop killing and eating animals ourselves, but expected to stop wild animals from fighting, hunting and eating prey (Williams (2006) p.146).

Imagine a world where we had the capability of rounding up wild animals and keeping them separated in some zoo-like enclosure, giving us the best chance to minimize their suffering. Even then, we would still have the problem of feeding the predators. Large predators like lions and tigers require so much energy that feeding them crickets or even straight up lobster would not cut it, since they do not meet the requirements for protein and fat needed by the predators. Captive lions and tigers are usually fed nine to eighteen pounds of red meat per day, and given addition vitamin supplements (Niacin, Calcium, Vitamin A, C, D, and E) on top of that. One could argue that it would morally right to kill animals to feed the predators, as it would minimize the suffering of the predators, or they could argue that we should let predators go extinct, since that would minimize the suffering of many future generations of prey animals. Needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few, right?

Williams mentioned that “some environmentalists of course think that we should not try to improve nature in this respect because nature is sacred and we should interfere with it as little as possible anyway”, however, it is not the fact that nature is sacred, but because human intervention would cause a collapse of the food chain (Williams (2006) p.146).

Whether prey animals were kept in captivity or left in the wild would make no difference; without predators, the only limiting factor on their reproduction would be food and water

resources. Say, a certain type of bird and a certain type of rabbit survive by eating the same seeds. The rabbits' population is kept in check by lynxes, and therefore there are enough seeds for both the birds and rabbits. However, imagine if lynxes were taken out of the equation; now the rabbits' population would be unchecked, and they would take over the entirety of the feeding area, leaving nothing for the birds. One might argue that, since all animals are equal, an environment with, say, 55 bunnies and no suffering would be better than one with 25 bunnies, 25 birds, and 5 foxes, and also included suffering. My response to the issue is that while we as humans should aim to minimize suffering we inflict on animals, we cannot expect nonhuman animals to conform to our moral standards, or enforce animals to comply to these morals, because such interference would cause a collapse of the food chain and massive loss in biodiversity, and therefore cause more suffering long term.

What about animals in captivity, then? Since capacity for suffering is “the only defensible boundary of concern for the interests of others”, we must give any animal with the ability to suffer or feel pain equality of consideration (Singer (1974) p.571). We are then morally required to treat them humanely, with “sympathy and consideration for [their] needs and distresses” and with “feelings or showing compassion and tenderness towards human beings and the lower animals” (Williams (2006) p.147). Even if we cannot force nonhuman animals to follow our moral standards and not hunt and fight and kill, we must uphold our own morals towards them.

### **Counterarguments**

One argument against equality of consideration based on capacity for suffering is that animals lack moral status, and that, “although animals experience pain as it is physically bad, their experience of it is not in itself morally bad” (Hsiao (2015) p.277). Hsiao argues that “it is only a certain type of pain experience—namely those of beings capable of rational

agency—that matters in a moral sense” (Hsiao (2015) pp.279-280). Following that, one could argue that pain experiences of human babies and those with severe brain damage do not matter morally. This argument is not very compelling, as his argument consists of comparing the killing of animals to infecting a computer with a virus, and that pain is morally irrelevant, since it is just a setback to the animals’ welfare conditions. Imagine a sheep, which needs grass to survive. Imagine also a blender, which needs electrical power to function. Following Hsiao’s argument, taking away both the sheep’s grass and the blender’s electricity would be bad physically, as it would keep both the sheep and the blender from functioning as they should, but since both the blender and the sheep lack the rational capacity of a human, the action of taking away their resources is not morally wrong. Consider, then, a person with severe, irreversible brain damage (one could also use a human infant for this analogy, though one would then need to address the more complex issue of potential for rational capacity, which I do not have the space to discuss at length), who needs food and water to survive. Would taking away their food and water be physically bad, like taking away grass from the sheep, and not morally wrong?

Hsiao dismisses this issue of humans without rational capacity by saying they have “root capacity” for rational agency, even if “they may lack the manifestations of those capacities, the very concepts of immaturity, disability, and mental illness presuppose the existence of capacities whose manifestations are blocked or destroyed.” (Hsiao (2015) pp.287-288). However, a system where we need these convenient exceptions is not as good as one that does not need them. In the analogy I described, only the blender would come out unscathed, able to be plugged back in without any drastic changes, and without having experienced pain. If they had their resources taken away, both the sheep and the person would not only endure pain in the way of hunger, malnourishment, and death, but they could also suffer mental distress during and after if they somehow survived the incident. Hsiao

argues that we should only minimize suffering those with the rational capabilities of humans, and that “a harm is just a setback to one or more of a being’s welfare conditions, with the harm of pain consisting in the impairment of a subject’s physical and mental well-being” (Hsiao (2015) p.283). However, a “setback” implies that the harm is reversible, without permanent ill-effect. Unlike the blender, the sheep and the person could be permanently impaired by their deprivation, either physically (by death) or mentally (by emotional trauma).

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