

Equality beyond our species

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Practice essay on the IPO 2023 prompt

Developed sections only. Outline notes and unfinished sections have been omitted.

Having accepted the principle of equality as a sound moral basis for relations with others of our own species, we are also committed to accepting it as a sound moral basis for relations with those outside our own species, the non-human animals.

Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* (1979). Cambridge: CUP, 19932, p. 55.

Oriental legends talk of kings being not just the kings of the humans but also of the ants, the deer, and the lion that eats the deer, all subjects that reside within the borders of the empire. It is suggested in John Rawls's political philosophy that the fundamental laws governing a just society be made from behind a veil of perception, such that when applied at random to any member of the society without the lawmaker's prior knowledge, no one should be worse off than another. This is practical advice on how to make the principle of equality a moral basis for relations among the citizens. Should the kings of the Orient also consider the ants behind the veil?

Through this quote, Peter Singer deals with precisely this problem of extending moral consideration to non-human animals, portraying it as a direct consequence of accepting equality amongst humankind.

Through this essay, I shall take Singer's quote as a starting point, and agree with it by illuminating (A.1) the mechanism between accepting the principle of equality (henceforth, E) as a moral basis for relations within the species and committing to accept E as a moral basis for relations with non-human animals. I shall also present a distinct argument to mobilize further support for the singer's claim, which (A.2) builds on a principle from the broader ethical framework which Singer proposes. I shall then seek to resolve the linguistic problem that comes in the way of the commitment towards multi-species democracy and hinders us from seeing the ant's worldview from behind the veil.

The derived conception of 'species'

While there is no consensus view amongst philosophers of biology on what the term 'species' should entail and several competing definitions that make several characteristics or combinations of the basis of differentiation exist, it is clear that 'species' cannot stand as an independent conception and what that means is that being a part of or rather not of a species cannot be an inherent property but rather, it is a property that can be deduced by the biologist studying the animal based on other properties inherent to the animal's nature – its morphology, genetic makeup, behavioral traits. It is also worth noting that how the morphology or any other property, for that matter, is determined for a certain animal is also not limited only to that animal and does involve comparison with other animals for there to be a valid analysis of any property. However, the property of morphology need not be talked of in another distinct property, and thus it is self-sufficient. This is not the case with species because the very act of sorting into species relies on some other properties that separate these (sets of) animals. The lack of self-sufficiency in its exposition is why I shall refer to the conception of 'species' as being derived.

Thus, we can now claim that when the quote talks of accepting E as a moral basis within our “own species,” it is not that to accept E as the moral basis, the species-ness of humans is not the only property that is at play. This is because species-ness is a derived conception and must necessitate the existence of one or more properties that feed into it. These can be characteristics ranging from the capacity for reason to the ability to suffer.

I make the case that the variation in these ‘defining’ characteristics of what gives one (‘our’) specieshood of homo sapiens is roughly equivalent within humans to that between humans and non-human animals. This is to say that the variation in intelligence, ability to suffer/feel pain, and so on is such that there is no clear separation between the humans and non-human animals.