

PATHWAYS TO PHILOSOPHY E

Moral Philosophy 'Reasons, values and conduct'

Essay Question 5

“Brute animals are not moral beings therefore we do not have moral obligations towards them.” Is that a good argument ?

1. Introduction

The first task in this essay is to clarify the terms. Brute animals is taken to be non-human animals. A Moral being is defined in the free on line dictionary as “a being capable of recognizing and conforming to the rules of right conduct”. Other more well known dictionaries aren't preparing to venture a common accepted definition. A commonsense view would be a moral being is a being that had some set of morals, notion of right and wrong and followed them. Moral obligations are defined again in the free on line dictionary as “an obligation arising out of considerations of right and wrong..... he did it out of a feeling of moral obligation ”

The argument needs to be considered in two steps. The first step is to confirm or otherwise that brute animals are not moral beings. The second step is to confirm or otherwise human's obligations to brute animals are contingent on brute animals being moral beings.

2. Brute animals are not moral beings

Humans are considered moral creatures because we distinguish between right and wrong. However it gets more complicated and there is no general agreement on what right means. Many things are considered right because God or some other authority dictate and objectively right things are harder to find. Our conscience may tell us that a particular action is right but we may have been conditioned to feel this way. Higher order brute animals such as monkeys, dogs etc will do the right thing if that involves avoiding punishment and following the leader of the pack (God ?) .

Do these animals have an inner voice or a conscience that tells them some things are wrong ? If such a voice exists in humans then it is quite possible to exist in other higher order animals to some extent. There is no feature of animals or clear dividing line that has been identified that separates humans from the rest in this regard. David Hume is supported my modern scientists in saying that the difference between humans and other higher order animals is one of degree not one feature. Species membership is a morally irrelevant characteristic. Our brains are more developed but not totally different than those of say chimpanzee.

On the other hand some humans have less intellectual capability due to age or illness or birth and their capabilities have been demonstrated to be less than that of specially trained monkeys.

On this basis it is not possible to state that ALL brute animals are not moral beings. Some higher order animals have some understanding of right and wrong.

3. Contingency on moral obligations to brute animals- disinterested view

Moral obligations in the disinterested view of morals (utilitarianism , for example) have generally considered to depend on the quality and nature of the inner life of animals . This nature was explored in section 2.

Peter Singer on the other hand follows the view that the important thing about our moral obligations to animals

is not can they think but can they suffer. Their ability to suffer puts them on a plane of moral equivalence to us.

The major problem with the disinterested view is that we all are interested and not so completely detached . The ethic of dialogue view overcomes this deficiency.

4. Contingency on moral obligations to brute animals – ethics of dialogue view

In the ethics of dialogue view the quality and nature of the inner life of animals reasoning or suffering is not relevant but the nature of the dialogue between humans and brute animals is. Other humans can hold us to account and judge our moral behavior but can brute animals? The ethics of dialogue involves communication between moral human beings using a common language . We do not share a language with brute animals but there are ways to communicate with them. Martin Burber believed that intimate I -Thou communication with brute animals was possible. Even this level of communication is less than what is normally considered necessary to undertake ethical dialogue and discuss what is right or wrong.

Brute animals such as dogs can hold humans to account for their behavior in a similar way that humans hold us to account. For Example, if I give insufficient attention to my wife or daughter I can expect them to move away from me in a personal sense. If I show less affection or concern then I will in time get less back. Similar responses can be expected from the family companion (not pet) dog. I admit I don't give him the degree of attention others do and I don't get the same enthusiastic welcome home of an evening.

5 Secondary reasons for moral obligations to animals

Moral obligations to animals can arise independently of any argument about their status as moral beings. We might feel we have moral obligations to loved ones who value animals. We might feel a general moral obligation to the planet and brute animals are part of this environment. Inconsideration to brute animals might take us down a slippery slope towards inconsideration to humans.

Morality can based on virtues as Aristotle proposed with respect for nature including brute animals as a virtue. A person who inflicts unnecessary pain and suffering on an animal is lowered in our eyes .

6. Conclusions

My first conclusion is that we have moral obligations to animals particularly those animals who are close to us and depend on us for their welfare. To think otherwise would diminish us significantly in our own eyes.

The world is the better for consideration for animals and nature in a utilitarian sense. Consideration should not go beyond the bounds of our biological state. We are meat eaters by evolution but the suffering to cattle in the abattoirs should be minimized.

The argument that brute animals are not moral beings and therefore we have no moral obligations to them is not a good one in my view. It is not clear that brute animals always lack any sense of right and wrong. Dialogue with animals about moral matters is difficult but not impossible in all cases. Dialogue with many other different thinking humans to myself is also difficult but not impossible. Although this is one reason for limiting our moral obligations using the ethics of dialogue view there are many other reasons for obligations to animals some of which are outlined above.

