

A Drinking Party with Peter Singer, Aristotle and Karl Marx:

Discussion on the Animal Liberation Movement

Lam Kai Chak
Philosophy, Chung Chi College

Prologue—How Singer, Aristotle and Marx Come Together

I still get a headache even now in the evening, as everybody left the bar last night blind drunk. Despite the headache, I've to recall last night memory and write all the things down at present, hoping that I could remember every single word we'd said. I've never participated in such a thought-provoking discussion.

When I went to Triumph Brewing Company, which's a bar with vegetarian dinner set in Princeton, as usual to find professor Singer, who's my thesis advisor, I could not believe my eyes! Two men, looking like Aristotle and Karl Marx (I've seen both of their pictures in the internet before), sat next to Singer, having drinks and chatting to each other. I introduced myself to them in amazement, and quickly whispered a question in Singer's ear.

SINGER: No need to whisper, Kai Chak. They've already anticipated you would ask me how I could conjure them up. Don't you remember you

accompanied me to China to learn Chinese spirit possession last semester break? It's really easy to learn, and once I've learnt that I thought of an interesting idea—why don't we conjure Aristotle and Marx up, also giving them the ability to speak in English and have a symposium with us discussing the modern movement of animal liberation?

KAI CHAK: Wow! they're for real! Hello!

SINGER: Kai Chak, please sit down. I just can't wait to discuss with these two great philosophers. So we'll start our deliberation on *whether human beings are superior to non-human animals, and then how should we live together on earth.*

Singer—Human Beings and Sentient Non-human Animals Are Equal

SINGER: My argument is based on utilitarianism: *if and only if a being has the capacity of suffering and enjoyment, that being has interests which should be equally considered by us* (*Practical Ethics* 48–53).

“Equality is a basic ethical principle, not an assertion of fact” (20; emphasis added, same hereafter). From this statement, I want to point out that we're talking about moral equality, but not factual equality. The reason is simple: *every* one of us is different from each other. Some're smarter, some're taller, some live longer and so on, and quite a number of these differences stem from uncontrollable biological and sociological factors. Yet, why do we still claim that *all humans are equal*? When we claim so, we're *not* claiming humans are *in actual fact* equal, but rather *morally* equal. As long as a being has the capacity to suffer and enjoy, the moral status of every individual should be the same; hence, each of us is only counted for one in ethical

judgements, irrespective of characteristics of factual inequality. This is what I call *the principle of equal consideration of interest* (48–53).

This principle has two notable implications. First and foremost, equal treatment is dismissed. There're too many genetic and social factors that render mere equal treatment, like equal opportunity, becoming an unattractive idea. For instance, I may suffer from poverty because of living in a society in which the distribution of resource is unjust, as the resource is distributed according to the heights of people. However, I formulate the principle using equal *consideration*. Consider voting, if we're adopting the thinking of equal treatment, granting each individual one vote with equal weight to others' votes is what we should do; yet, it's unfair to the intellectually disabled. For them, by equal consideration, we should do more—let say providing an extra aid to them so that their votes can really reflect their will. The “*unequal treatment produces a more egalitarian result,*” since merely ensuring every being starts from the same starting line simply ignores all biological and social factors (22).

The second, and more important, implication is that the principle is not only limited to humans, but also extended to *some* non-human animals. Just like what I've said at the very beginning of my speech, if and only if a being has the capacity of suffering and enjoyment, that being has interests to be considered morally equally. Since most of the non-human animals have such capacity, their interests should be considered equally. Therefore, *human beings and sentient non-human animals are morally equal, except the cases of taking lives.*

Aristotle—Reasoning as a Distinctive Function of Humans

MARX: It's indeed inspiring! It's hard to imagine how much have the cattle suffered before the dinner set arrived in front of me. But...

ARISTOTLE: Wait! Without a doubt, human beings are definitely superior to *all* non-human animals.

Different beings have different functions. For plants, the proper functions of them are only nutrition and growth. But for animals, the proper functions are not only nutrition and growth, but also the perception. Most importantly, the proper functions of humans are *reasoning*, in addition to the functions of plants and animals. Reasoning is a kind of activity of the soul which's virtuous because it allows us to have the practical wisdom to make the right decisions at the right time, leading us to happiness, *eudaimonia* and a good life (15–16)! Humans are, surely, superior to animals. Could animals be possible to reason and think about what's a good life? No! Yet, we humans can. We can reason and thus have this kind of moral thinking. "*The unique and characteristic activity of human beings is reasoning*" (Shields).

KAI CHAK: No, Aristotle. You simply ignore the fact that there're some non-human animals *can* reason while some humans who *can't* reason.

SINGER: There're three points I shall make to refute your argument which's based on functions of beings. Firstly, there're in fact, as Kai Chak said, some humans who can't reason such as babies, the intellectually disabled and so on. While modern science shows that some of the non-human animals—like gorillas, bonobos, orangutans and so forth—can even reason better than these humans (95). Hence, your assertion that reasoning is the unique activity of humans is false.

The second point follows immediately from the first one. From the fact that reasoning is not the distinctive nature—or function as you like—of humans and we insist in choosing it as a property to determine the moral status of a being, we must accept *either* the conclusion of not all human

beings are morally equal *or* the conclusion of all humans and some non-human animals are equal. The former is counterintuitive as we normally think that the interests of all members of our species should be considered equally. Thus, we must accept the latter (Wilson).

Lastly, you may argue *in actual fact* reasoning ability of humans are generally much better than non-human animals, so we humans are *in fact* superior to non-human animals. Doubtlessly, I agree; however, why should we use reasoning as a determinant of such superiority? If we determine the superiority of species by comparing the speed of climbing the trees, then haplorhines or birds/aves maybe the most superior species. By considering the *factual* superiority, for some aspects humans are better, but for some aspects non-human animals are better. Therefore, we can't simply claim humans are superior to non-human animals.

Marx—Humans Should Live as Species-beings

MARX: Bravo! The refutation is very compelling. But...

ARISTOTLE: Modern science? Show me!

SINGER: Sure. But not now. I welcome you to come to the bioethics centre near my office tomorrow. Marx, please go ahead.

MARX: I disagree with Aristotle that the distinctive nature or function of humans is reasoning. Rather living as *species-beings*.

Labor is the most essential nature of humans which's a social productive activity. I shall elaborate the point that labor as our species-essence in two aspects. The first point is that labor is a free productive activity with consciousness of our own lives. We can objectify the nature

which's a sensuous external world. Such objectification of the external world is the self-actualization of our thoughts, and also free from constraints. Secondly, the labor of us are not only aiming at actualizing ourselves, but also the communal lives. We objectify the resource in nature, using and making tools sometimes for our own uses. In the meantime, in most of the time, we do so for our neighbours. "*The human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations.*" By living out a free productive life with consciousness of your own is what I've called living as a species-being. And it makes humans the distinctive kind of creatures (Wolff 28–37; also Marx 325).

KAI CHAK: Not at all. Some non-human animals use tools in nature, and some may even make them. I'm not sure whether they're conscious of their own lives and activities, but I can sure that they're free to exert labor on and objectify the things in external world (Singer, *Practical Ethics* 64–66, 94–122).

SINGER: I appreciate the efforts of Aristotle and Marx. They're both trying to distinguish between human species and non-human animals' species, in order to show that we are indeed superior to non-human animals.

Nevertheless, two fundamental questions must be dealt with anyhow. The first one is that *why are the characteristics of humans that we've and non-human animals haven't can make us morally superior to them?* To answer this question, the second question is needed to be answered beforehand: *what arguments can be put forward against my prerequisite of a being having interests is the capacity of suffering and enjoyment?* If you can't deny whenever a being is sentient the interests of that being is needed to be considered, what's the point of arguing over the distinctive nature of humans?

Kai Chak—Humans Could Potentially Acquire the Reasoning Ability to Talk About Ethics

KAI CHAK: It does have a point. I want to propose an argument that *non-human animals indeed have interests to be considered by humans because they're sentient beings; yet, the weight of human beings should be considered morally heavier*. Therefore, there's no need for me to answer the second question and answer the first one directly.

With reference to Aristotle, reasoning makes human a distinctive kind of creature, but it's proven to be a failure. So I want to revise this point: *that all humans could potentially acquire the reasoning ability to talk about ethics makes human a distinctive kind of creature*. Some non-human animals may reason better than some humans such as the severely intellectually disabled, babies and so on; nonetheless, these non-human animals are *empirically impossible* to acquire reasoning ability to talk about morality. Even the cleverest non-human animals have a limit.

You may argue that some of the humans above-mentioned really *couldn't* be possible to acquire such ability. For instance, there're babies growing up suffering severe brain injuries, the inborn intellectually disabled and so forth. My thinking is that if such people would not have been born/suffered in these ways, they would have acquired such reasoning ability. So it's *empirically possible*. *If and only if a being is potentially capable of acquiring such reasoning ability, that being is one of the members of human species*.

By defining human species in this way, I can claim *all humans are equal*. I'm not saying that non-human animals don't have interests to be considered. Rather, *all humans are equal but humans are morally superior to non-human animals; if and only if the interests of non-human animals are conflicting with the interests of humans, and both parties' interests are in the same*

weight after the calculation of other moral factors. The reason is simple: *only* humans could possibly acquire the reasoning ability to *talk about* ethics. When in such situation (conflicting interests between human species and non-human animals), it's a right choice to give a being, who could possibly *discuss* whether a choice is a right one, heavier moral weight. *Humans "invent" the notions of morality and ethics.*

For example, if an unfamiliar cat and a stranger are both suffering a serious injury in front of me—excluding the discussion of the possibility of dying—and I can only save one of them, I should save the stranger, provided that their interests are equal after the calculation of *other* moral factors. The reason is not because of psychological affection I have for that human, but rather the fact that the stranger is our species. I'm, therefore, *not* a speciesist because species is *relevant* to the consideration of interests in this case.

SINGER: Good try, though there are a number of flaws in your argument. I'll discuss with you later. As the time is running out, I want to discuss the problem of how should we—humans and non-human animals—live together on earth.

Minimizing Unnecessary Suffering on Earth

SINGER: There's one thing we should do which is of utmost importance: *all people should become vegetarians.* The most essential reason is to reduce unnecessary suffering caused by humans, especially aiming at the suffering caused by factory farming. "*Vegetarianism is a form of boycott*" (*Animal Liberation* 162). The people who profit from the exploitation of a great deal of non-human animals—causing a great amount of suffering and pain—need our money. Thus, the most direct way to minimize unnecessary suffering is to become a vegetarian (159–183).

MARX: Oh! It's just too hard to refrain myself from eating meat. What a great joy it is, eating such a well-cooked beef right now.

KAI CHAK: I understand that. We all know that in theory we ought to do so; however, *practically* it's really hard. Hence, I want to put forward three suggestions so as to make our action easier.

Before any suggestions made, noted that the aim of humans to live with non-human animals is clear: *living with sentient non-human animals by equally considering their interests*. As our prerequisite of having interests to be equally considered is whether a being is *sentient*, if not then the interests of that being can be ignored—temporarily leaving the topic of taking lives of animals behind.

Keep doing research is the very first thing we can do, finding out which kinds of animals are not sentient. By so doing, we can still enjoy some meats, though not all of them. Besides, trying to treat morality as a relative concept. No one requires every one of us to become a 100% vegetarian. If you can refrain yourself from eating meat only for one day per week, then it must be better than the case that you just give up doing anything. As professor Singer has once told me “*you are living at least a minimally decent ethical life, even if not a perfect one*” (*The Most Good* 10). Moreover, there's not just one way in eliminating unnecessary suffering. For instance, we can buy free-range products such as free-range eggs, milk and so forth.

I can barely remember when I was delivering my speech on the subject of how humans and non-human animals should live together, Marx and Aristotle have been completely drunk already and it's also late at night. Shortly afterwards, Singer's said he would take care of them and suggested that I should go back home first.

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Teacher’s comment:

The essay of Mr. Lam demonstrates several good qualities that a good argumentative essay should possess. Firstly, he accurately outlines the basic stand of different authors from our selected texts. Secondly, when he argues that all animals are morally equal, he has responded to several possible counter-arguments. Thirdly, not only describing and analyzing the theories of our selected texts, his own point of view is provided with rigorous reasons in the conclusion of the essay. Such a good performance is indeed rarely seen in the work of a first-year undergraduate student. (Kwok Pak Nin Samson)