

Human Life And Animal Life

There is general agreement that human life is more important than the life of other creatures. In Judaism, Christianity and Islam, this idea is supported by the special way in which God created human beings, who were the high point of his creation and who were entrusted as the superior life form, to take charge over God's creation. Indeed, when we talk of commandments such as 'thou shalt not kill', we understand this to apply to human beings only. Most people find it acceptable to kill animals for food, clothing, or to experiment on them for medical advancement. However, some non-religious people, as well as some religious believers, have forcefully challenged this view.

Let us look at some reasons why Humanists and atheists dispute the religious view of human superiority: Darwin's Theory of Evolution, now seen as uncontroversial among the majority of modern scientists, turned the beliefs about human beings' superiority upside down! If it is accepted that we evolved, over millions of years, from simpler lifeforms, the idea that we and other animals were created fully-formed, as we look today, at the hand of God, and that animals were put on earth to feed and clothe us, just does not make sense. Indeed, Darwin himself wrote:



Evolution

Evolution of life; Man_Half-tube / gettyimages

'Animals, whom we have made our slaves, we do not like to consider our equal.'

Charles Darwin
Notebook B, (1837-38)

In *The Descent of Man*, which Darwin published in 1871, twelve years after *On the Origin of Species*, he bravely put forward the idea that human beings, too, were part of the evolutionary process, and that we evolved from apes. Many religious people were still reeling from the publication of Darwin's earlier book, and Darwin's claims in *The Descent of Man* were seen by many as totally outrageous and blasphemous. Darwin had essentially relegated human beings to being just part of the animal world – another species of primate. Darwin's theory is no longer controversial among scientists. Accepting it, for non-religious people, means that no longer can we claim ourselves to be something apart from and removed from the rest of the animal kingdom. What distinguishes us from other primates is not that we were created specially, but that we have developed, through evolution, a more highly advanced intellect than any other animal. So, if a Humanist or other non-believer regards human life as particularly special and worthy of higher respect than that of non-human animals – which many of them do - it is on the basis of this. Moreover, as Dawkins argued in his book *The Selfish Gene*, all species of animals are genetically hardwired to protect their own kind and to ensure the continuation of their own genes. According to Dawkins, it is for this reason why the vast majority of us place a higher value on our own species, and this is also why feel justified in using other species for own ends. For Dawkins, humans have not understood this and have sought to explain this valuing of their own species to themselves by claiming that a higher being has created them to be superior. In Dawkins' view, our scientific understanding of the world shows this reliance on being awarded a higher status over other creation to be incorrect.

SINGER AND SPECIESISM

Peter Singer is perhaps the world's most prominent philosopher of ethics. He is also a Humanist. Singer argues that, as it has been shown that human beings evolved from other animals, any ideas we have about the superiority of human beings over non-human animals are misguided. He sees religious beliefs about the **sanctity of life**, as playing a major part in this misunderstanding of status of our own species in the world. Singer argues that human beings, in using animals for their own ends are guilty of **speciesism**. Speciesism, Singer says, is a form of prejudice, much like racism or sexism, as it assumes that human beings are superior based simply on the fact that they are human, and this assumption leads humans to discriminate against species other than our own and thus to treat non-human animals badly.

For Singer, and many other Humanists, it is **sentience** that matters in deciding how important a life is. Sentience is the ability of a being to experience pain and pleasure. People often justify killing or causing pain to animals to serve our needs by claiming (as we have seen) that they were not created by God to be as special or sacred as humans. People may also say that animals are inferior, therefore, we can use them because they lack our intellect, and ability to talk. Of course, scientists are discovering surprising new information that shows that we have grossly underestimated the intelligence and capacity for communication among many species of animals. But the real issue, for Singer, is whether or not a being is sentient. Can it feel pain and pleasure; does it have the capacity to suffer? In addition, some animals have a higher order of sentience, as they also demonstrate self-awareness; that is, they actively seek pleasure and avoidance of pain, and they demonstrate an awareness and knowledge of their existence in the world. Not all animal life is sentient; they are insentient – things like small molluscs, insects would fall into this category. Singer argues that we should value and respect the wellbeing of all sentient creatures.

Now as a class attempt the ranking activity

POINTS FOR REFLECTION

How easy or difficult was this task? Explain.

What difficulties or difficult conclusions may arise if sentience is used as a measure of judging the value of life?

How useful do you think it is to use the idea of sentience in this way?

Has this exercise confirmed or challenged any of your beliefs or ideas?