The Sustainability of Animal Ethics

A Synthesis of Utilitarianism and Deontology

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Introduction

Earth's current status calls for great advances in sustainability (Jones and Jacobs 2007). At the same time, many theorists claim that our current treatment of animals is unacceptable and argue for an ethical treatment of animals. Kate Rawles (2006; 2008) argues that the two problems of sustainability and treatment of animals should be tackled at the same time. She proposes to include animal welfare into the concept of sustainability (Rawles 2006).

In my view, this is only one of the many possible paths to solve this problem. Another is the reverse: the inclusion of the concept of sustainability[1] into animal ethics. It is not self-evident that this inclusion has already taken place: as Rawles contends, animal ethics and sustainability studies have been two separate fields of study so far (Rawles 2008, 57). Whether animal ethical theories are ecologically sustainable is indeed very much a question.

I will review two groups of animal ethical theories: deontological theories (represented by Midgley 1998 and Rollin 2006) and utilitarian theories (represented by Singer 2009 and Višak 2013). The theories I review will be collapsed into one general animal ethical theoretical perspective, which is defensible on deontological and utilitarian grounds. Where authors' opinions differ, arguments will be evaluated and weighted. The resulting general perspective will then be judged on its sustainability: is the current general perspective on animal ethics sustainable? If it is not, which elements are not? Can some adjustments to these elements make the theory ecologically sustainable or is it simply incompatible with sustainability? In answering these questions, the synthesis of animal ethics and sustainability that Rawles (2006; 2008) so powerfully calls for will be brought some steps closer.

In the first chapters, some key concepts in animal ethics will be discussed: intuitions and instrumental and intrinsic value. Next, several chapters focus on the animal ethical theories themselves: I will elaborate upon the difference between utilitarian and deontological ethical theory, after which the various exclusion and inclusion criteria that have been used by both deontological and utilitarian theories to determine whether animals should be included in our sphere of moral concern or not will be examined. A short chapter will discuss the death of animals. The various ethical theories will be collapsed into one general perspective. A chapter will be devoted to giving a general definition of the concept of sustainability. The conclusion will assess the sustainability of the general animal ethical perspective and will demonstrate that overall, animal ethics score very well on several indicators of sustainability.

[1] The definition of this concept can be found in the chapter "A definition of sustainability".

The importance of intuition

Višak defines intuitions as "things that strike us as true without us knowing entirely why they do" (2013, 138). The various theorists I will discuss assign divergent importance to our intuitions. For Rollin, intuitions are a "starting point" (2006, 36), after which the real job of assembling a theory can begin. Rollin does not define the moral status of intuitions relative to moral theory very clearly. On the one hand, Rollin argues that intuitions can be adjusted to match the subsequent theory, implying that theory supersedes intuition (2006, 36). On the other hand, Rollin proposes a dialectical approach to intuitions and theory, "each modifying the other" (2006, 36), implying equality of importance. As such, the relative positioning of intuitions and rational argument on the scale of importance is left undefined.

Brain imaging research has not discerned any fundamental difference between intuitions and "immediate emotionally based responses" (Singer 2005, 350). In the same vein, we tend to describe intuitions as "feelings" (Rollin 2006, 35). The importance of emotion in morality is discussed extensively by Midgley (1998). Midgley finds that claims of emotional involvement in matters of animal ethics are often met with disapproval. She estimates that "the fault must lie, not in the presence of feeling, but in the absence of thought" (Midgley 1998, 35). Regarding this issue, there are two extreme streams of thought: Rationalists argue that feeling has no place in morality, which is strictly "a contract between rational beings" (Midgley 1998, 42), whereas the opposing Emotivists make "morality entirely a matter of feeling" (Midgley 1998, 42). Midgley argues that we should take both feeling and rationality into account in our moral considerations. She argues that "sensitivity requires rationality to complete it, and vice versa" (Midgley 1998, 43).

Singer looks at intuitions with little passion, bestowing no real importance to them (2005). Moral intuitions, he claims, result from the evolutionary development of such adaptive behavioural and emotional patterns as reciprocity and preference for more closely related human beings. He claims that moral intuitions about activities that only became possible recently, such as cyberbullying, are remarkably absent. Singer argues that there is no morally relevant difference between activities that were possible a thousand years ago and activities that only became possible relatively recently. As such, the moral value of intuitions about the former category is lacking. That value, according to Singer, derives from a consistent answer to the question "What ought we to do?" (Singer 2005, 345). While evolution may *explain* (the origins of) some intuitional aspects of our "common morality" (Singer 2005, 343), it does not *justify* them. Intuitions cannot therefore be a robust criterion in assessing the quality of a moral theory or any of its implications (Singer 2005). Singer argues that the

only relevant criterion for judging any moral theory is the strength of its arguments, not the acceptability of its implications.

For analytical purposes, Višak discerns, as did Midgley, two extreme views about the importance of intuitions: "moral intuitions are [either] completely irrelevant, or … moral intuitions are indisputable data that a moral theory should accommodate" (2013, 138). Utilitarians like Peter Singer usually take on the former position and they have always "challenge[d] what counts as accepted wisdom" (Višak 2013, 141). The simple fact that the cleanliness of a room or upbringing, among other factors of questionable moral relevance, have been shown to influence people's moral intuitions leads Višak to the statement that "it needs at least a further argument to conclude that … intuitive judgments are morally relevant and even morally right" (2013, 140).

None of the abovementioned authors accept solely intuitive moral arguments as convincing. The common view is that rational argument is always needed when assessing a moral theory or its implications. In assessing moral claims about animals, then, it would be wise to resort to rational arguments for indications of right and wrong.

Instrumental and intrinsic value

The difference between the concepts of intrinsic and instrumental value is most important in deontological animal ethics, as utilitarian ethics tend to avoid these terms, in particular the former. The concept of "moral concern" is necessary to understand instrumental and intrinsic value. In animal ethicists' parlance, moral considerations do not exclusively consider objects of moral concern. The objects of moral concern are the individual sentient beings whose interests are taken into account in moral considerations. As the previous sentence implies, the interests themselves are also taken into account in moral considerations, while not (always) being objects of moral concern. Later chapters will consider this difference in greater detail.

Instrumental value is most easily defined. It is the value an object or being has for some being that has intrinsic value. The object that has instrumental value must be of interest to the other being. In fact, one can safely say that all interests have instrumental value. Intrinsic value, as Rollin (2006, 151) defines it, follows from being an object of moral concern. Because an individual is an object of moral concern, it has intrinsic value (Rollin 2006, 151 – 152). In contrast to instrumental value, objects (beings) that have intrinsic value do not have that value for others.

Rights are then used as an *instrument* to protect the individual object with intrinsic value from "the tyranny of the majority" (Rollin 2006, 152). This may be interpreted as a safeguard against purely

utilitarian democratic utility-maximisation, which might harm individual interests if that is in the general interest. Accordingly, Rollin claims it is an "anti-utilitarian" (2006, 154) position. Midgley asserts that even intrinsic value itself can be an instrument to provide us with an "adequate priority-system for arbitration" (1998, 96) in Utilitarian cost-benefit analyses. Midgley, however, focuses more on the reasons why animals should be excluded from our moral concern than on reasons why animals should be included in our moral concern and does not discuss intrinsic value in much detail.

It must be noted that certain beings can have both intrinsic and instrumental value. A deer has intrinsic value by virtue of it being an object of moral concern (it has interests). It has this value for itself and not for others. It has instrumental value to some predators (to others) by virtue of it being necessary to sustain their welfare (it is an interest).

Utilitarianism vs. deontology

Now that I have given an overview of some concepts that animal ethical theories tend to employ often, I will turn to the animal ethical theories themselves. I will first clarify the exact differences between the two major streams in animal ethical thought, utilitarianism and deontology[2].

Utilitarianism

The basic elements of utilitarianism are welfarism, maximisation and impartiality (Višak 2013, 27). That which has ultimate value in utilitarianism is welfare; accordingly, utilitarianism is termed a *welfarist* moral theory, the first element of utilitarianism. The rightness of an outcome is determined by its effect on net welfare (Višak 2013, 29). What is right is what maximises the good (i.e., welfare; Višak 2013, 30). This determines the element of *maximisation*, the second element. Impartiality – the third element – is related to universalism. Utilitarianism is *universalist* in the sense that it takes the welfare consequences for everyone that is affected by an action into account (Višak 2013, 31). It is *impartial* in the sense that everyone's welfare counts equally. Furthermore, utilitarianism is a "consequentialist moral theory" (Višak 2013, 28), which means that actions are evaluated with respect to their outcomes. In essence, utilitarian animal ethics try to show that animals' interests[3] (i.e., welfare) should be taken into account in these moral considerations.

Singer explicitly states that our idea of moral consideration is based on a moral principle of equality, which does not take into account the capabilities or even the specific interests of the beings involved.

[2] Although contract-based animal ethical theories are a significant factor in the animal ethical debate, their influence is not as profound as those of utilitarian and deontological theories. I have therefore chosen not to discuss them.

[3] In the animal ethical literature, the term "interest" appears to be preferred to "preference".

This principle requires us to extend our moral consideration to all creatures that are affected by an action, "black or white, masculine or feminine, human or nonhuman" (Singer 2009, 5). Singer uses the term "speciesism" to describe moral evaluations which take only human interests into account, or in which human interests are given preference, where nonhuman interests may be taken (equally) into account as well (2009, 6).

Equal moral consideration does not imply equal moral treatment. Animals would not, when given equal moral consideration, be given the right to vote, as this would not resonate well with their specific interests. It *would* mean that, for example, an animal's pain would be given equal consideration as a human's pain. As Singer argues, "equal consideration for different beings may lead to different treatment and different rights" (2009, 2).

Deontology

The deontological[4] animal ethical theories take a different approach. They do not aim to institutionalise a new ethic, as utilitarians do, but they try to expand the sphere of *current* moral concern for humans to include nonhuman animals without changing the basic morality (i.e., what is good and what is bad) that people hold. While this common morality may be based on intuitions, deontological theorists employ rational arguments to expand the (intuitive) moral concern for humans to include sentient animals. Rollin, for instance, bases his philosophy on Plato, who claimed that "a philosopher … cannot teach others; he or she can only remind" (Rollin 2006, 40). Accordingly, Rollin reminds the reader of his own pre-existing (human-centred) morality and shows that according to the reader's own perceptions of right and wrong, moral concern should be extended to nonhuman animals. In order to do this, Rollin assumes the existence of a basic "consensus ethical[5] ideal" (Rollin 2006, 44). While the topic is rife with debate, Rollin asserts that there is far more agreement than disagreement about what is right and wrong. Midgley (1998) employs basically the same approach in trying to debunk all exclusion criteria that have been used to exclude nonhuman animals from the scope of our moral concern.

The assumption that "rights" are the absolute goal of deontological animal ethics is mistaken. Rollin views rights as a *means* to the end of fair treatment, as a "safeguard of the moral status of the individual and his or her … nature or *telos* against the pressures of social convenience or general welfare that might otherwise tend to submerge his or her individuality and crucial interests" (2006,

[4] The term "deontological" may not be perfectly accurate for describing Rollin and Migley's philosophies, but – as a superior term for their position between utilitarian and rights-based ethics, heavily drenched in intrinsic value, is nonexistent – will suffice for current purposes.

[5] I have not detected any systematically differential use of either the terms "morality/moral" or "ethics/ethical." I will use the term morality to refer to the differentiation between actions that are right from those that are wrong and the term ethics to refer to the systematic study of this topic.

150). Midgley, on the other hand, does not even acknowledge this importance of rights, and states that rights are "the really desperate word" (1998, 61). She feels that using the concept of right is of no use, as "in its moral sense, it oscillates uncontrollably between applications which are too wide to resolve conflicts ('the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness') and ones which are too narrow to be plausible ('the basic human right to stay at home on Bank Holiday'). (…) Its various uses have diverged too far to be usefully reunited" (Midgley 1998, 63). Midgley suggests to stop relying on the concept. Rollin "do[es] not endorse this extreme position" (2006, 108), because he feels people usually understand what the concept means.

Exclusion

Exclusion criteria, i.e., criteria that have been used to exclude animals from our moral concern, are the main focus of deontological animal ethicists (Midgley 1998; Rollin 2006). Still, utilitarian animal ethicists do devote significant attention to this subject. In essence, all animal ethicists first try to show that the various exclusion criteria are not morally relevant and that therefore animals fall within the scope of our moral concern. I will discuss Singer, Midgley and Rollin in the following paragraphs, but as Rollin is most elaborate on this subject, the focus will be on his contribution.

The first difference Rollin covers is *dominion* (2006, 46). Some believe that God gave humans dominion over animals, while others believe that evolution turned out in a way that put humans on top of the species pyramid, and that this means that humans can do as they please to "lower" animals. Rollin argues that these are simply versions of "might makes right[6]","an attitude which does not only indicate a condemnable morality, but an absence of it (Rollin 2006, 47). Indeed, Rollin argues that if power is a morally relevant criterion at all, it is one which forces beings with superior power (i.e., humans) to lend full moral concern to other beings (Rollin 2006, 48), because of the Golden Rule that one should treat others like one himself would like to be treated.

Another set of criteria he details is *reason* and *language*. While the relationship between reason and moral agency is clear, as moral agency cannot be ascribed to beings that cannot reason morally, what remains unclear is why reason would be a relevant criterion for moral concern. Social contract theorists, according to Rollin, argue that there is a link between being a moral agent and being an object of moral concern. "Only rational beings are capable of participating in a social contract" (Rollin 2006, 51) and, according to some, they are the only ones protected by the contract. Rollin argues that this would mean that animals, who are apparently irrational, and non-rational humans do not differ in terms of participation in the drawing-up of the contract, which means that animals as well as

[6] Some Christians would likely disagree with Rollin's claim that God's might is what makes right.

non-rational humans (children, future humans, the retarded, etc.) are not objects of moral concern. This renders the social contract view[7] "wildly implausible," according to Rollin (2006, 52). If social contract theorists, on the other hand, argue that non-rational humans are objects of moral concern despite not having participated in the drawing up of the contract, then reason cannot be a morally relevant criterion for excluding animals from moral concern.

Kant has a different reason for why rationality and language exclude animals from moral concern (Rollin 2006, 58 – 65). Because humans are the only beings capable of language and language is required for rationality[8] (because rationality requires concepts[9]), humans are the only rational beings. All rational beings have the same "end", which is universal truth. We should therefore never treat a rational being (i.e., human) merely as a "means," as that would be irrational since we share the same "end." Non-rational beings (i.e., animals), on the other hand, are "merely a means to an end. That end is man" (Rollin 2006, 61). Therefore, according to Kant, animals are not objects of our moral concern.

Rollin argues that rationality and language are not morally relevant criteria at all. We do not exclude infants, the retarded and the senile from our moral concern because they are not rational and do not possess language. According to Rollin, we cannot employ the argument that "the human species … is characterized by rationality" (2006, 72), because then the species would be an object of moral concern, while individuals are the focus of moral considerations (in all animal ethical theories I have reviewed). We could also ask ourselves whether or not we only morally concern ourselves with aspects of human activities that are rational. The answer would be that we do not (Rollin 2006, 74). Rollin argues that rationality and language are completely unrelated to our moral concern in the sense described above and as such, they are not morally relevant criteria for excluding animals from our moral concern.

[7] In my opinion, Rollin overly generalises this specific social contract view, which surely not all social contract theorists hold. However, his argumentation for the moral irrelevance of reason is unaffected by this rhetorical decoy.

[8] Midgley remarks that if language were truly necessary for rationality, animals could not be said to vary in intelligence and would live in a totally disordered world, as they would have no way to understand even parts of it (1998, 56). In fact, animals do vary in intelligence and understand parts of the world quite well, which shows us that language is not necessary for rationality (1998, 56). This statement depends on the equality of intelligence or understanding and rationality. If one employs a concept of rationality that is broader than intelligence or understanding alone, Midgley's argument does not hold.

[9] Midgley adds that animals must somehow logically make use of concepts. Language did not simply appear in humans, it evolved. "To suppose that speech could have originated among creatures which had no understanding [and] no concepts … is wild" (Midgley 1998, 60). According to Midgley, it would make much more sense for language to have evolved in beings which already had understanding and concepts and that thus an animal can have understanding and concepts without having language.

Singer also discusses the exclusion criterion *language*, albeit more briefly than Rollin. As has been stated above, some insist that language is relevant for the capacity to suffer (which is Singer's most important *inclusion* criterion, as will be discussed in a later chapter), and that a lack of language indicates a lack of suffering (Singer 2009, 14). This position may be supported in two ways: firstly, one may argue that mental states can only be ascribed to beings that have a language, and secondly, one may argue that we can only know whether an animal suffers when it tells us it does so. Singer does away with the first argument in judging that the capacity for feeling pain does not depend on language at all, as it is evolutionarily more primitive (2009, 14). The second argument, Singer continues, is flawed as well. First, he argues, there are stronger lines of communication than spoken language. Second, if we accept the argument that a being can only suffer if it can tell us it does so, then infants and young children that are incapable of spoken language cannot suffer. This is implausible and as such, language cannot be essential for the capacity to suffer, according to Singer (2009, 14).

Mental capacities are another criterion by which human and nonhuman animals differ. Their superior mental capacities may lead humans to suffer more than animals, but their inferior mental capacities may lead animals to suffer more than humans, depending on the situation (Singer 2009, 15 – 16). As such, mental capacities should, according to Singer, be included in the moral considerations at hand, but cannot be said *a priori* to exclude nonhuman animals from our moral concern.

Singer also details the often used exclusion criterion of *pain*. Some have argued that animals cannot feel pain and should therefore be excluded from (some) moral considerations. Of course, we cannot "observe" pain in an animal. Singer replies that we cannot "observe" pain in other humans as well, which would mean that if someone would have any scepticism about animals feeling pain (and would concomitantly exclude them from moral consideration), that scepticism should be extended to all other humans.

Three arguments usually support the intuition that animals can feel pain: the behavioural, anatomical, and evolutionary similarities between human and nonhuman animals (Singer 2009, 11). As far as behaviour is concerned, animals behave in much the same way as humans do when "feeling pain." Additionally, animals' nervous systems are very similar to humans'. It would also make sense for animals to have developed the ability to feel pain in the course of evolution, because it would heighten their chances of survival and reproduction. We can thus safely assume that at least some animals are capable of feeling pain and that this is not a sufficient criterion for excluding them from moral consideration.

Inclusion

Accordingly, there must be different criteria to restrict the scope of our moral concern. These may be called *inclusion* criteria and are the main focus of utilitarian animal ethical theories. I will discuss the views of deontological and utilitarian animal ethical theories on inclusion criteria in turn.

Singer defines the inclusion criteria as the ability to feel pleasure or suffering. He quotes Bentham, who wrote: "The question is not, Can they *reason*? nor Can they *talk*? but, Can they *suffer*?" (Singer 2009, 7). According to Singer, this is not just any random criterion, such as the ability to reason or talk, but it is "a prerequisite for having interests at all" (Singer 2009, 7). It is a necessary and sufficient requirement for saying that a being has interests (Singer 2009, 8). Singer uses the example of kicking a stone along the road to show that suffering is a sufficient requirement for having interests. We cannot meaningfully say that it is in a stone's interest to not be kicked along the road, as the stone's welfare (if any) will not be affected by any actions performed on it. A (live) mouse, on the other hand, can be said to have an interest in not being kicked along the road, as its welfare will be negatively affected by it (it will suffer).

Rollin argues that while this brings us closer to an answer than, for example, rationality and language, in some cases it still does not conform to our everyday intuitions about morality. Pleasure and suffering are not the only relevant criteria. According to Rollin, we extend our moral considerations beyond actions that have a bearing on pleasure and suffering (2006, 75). An example Rollin supplies is Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, "where people are kept in a state of happy idiocy by the use of drugs" (Rollin 2006, 75). According to Rollin, such a situation would scarcely pass for good morality, even though the objects of our moral concern seem to enjoy themselves[10].

Accordingly, there must be different criteria to restrict the scope of our moral concern. Rollin argues that the scope of our moral concern is restricted by interests in general: only creatures that have interests[11] can be granted moral concern (Rollin 2006, 95). Interests are broader than pleasure and pain. Freedom is an interest not necessarily related to pleasure and pain. Still, according to Rollin,

[10] The difference between Singer and Rollin becomes quite striking here. Singer would probably argue that this situation is not immoral at all: the subjects' pleasure is being maximized, which indicates good morality. Rollin bases his theory on the consensus ethical ideal he assumes exists, which would allegedly disapprove of this happy idiocy.

[11] Plants, bacteria, ecosystems, etc. do not have interests. The word "interest" implies that actions matter to the individual (which, at the very least, requires some form of sentience); nothing matters for plants, bacteria, etc., even though they show automatic biological reactions to environmental stress.

freedom and other interests should be taken into account in moral considerations. We could formulate this as a right to moral concern (Rollin 2006, 110)[12].

In addition to rights, in our day-to-day morality, we say that sentient beings have some "intrinsic value" that only sentient living creatures have, which has the effect that some actions may not be performed on a given sentient being, even if they are in the general interest (i.e., if they increase net welfare) (Midgley 1998, 17; Rollin 2006). Midgley and Rollin (the deontological animal ethicists) both mention this "[intrinsic] value" (Midgley 1998, 93; Rollin 2006, 151). Midgley spells it out as follows:

> *To recognize the spark of conscious life out there is to see it as having a certain importance. … You can express it from the point of view of the creature itself, saying 'since it is conscious, injury and extinction will be bad for it'. Or you can put it more abstractly, saying something like 'since it is conscious, it has value; if it is injured or extinguished, the world will be poorer'* (1998, 93).

Matters of life and death

So far I have been talking of the interests of living sentient beings while in existence. Whether life itself is an interest of these creatures – even before life commences – is another question. Many theorists do not discuss this topic in great detail. Tatjana Višak (2013) delves deeply into this subject, but much of her discussion is not acutely relevant for current purposes. I will address this topic only briefly here.

The right to *life*, for Rollin, is a more difficult issue than the right to moral concern. Some argue that, since animals do not have a concept of life or death, killing them is not morally problematic as it does not "matter" to the animal; life is not an animal's explicit interest (Rollin 2006, 112). Others argue that life is instrumental to the animal's other explicit interests and, as such, is worthy of protection (Rollin 2006, 113). The first argument is problematic, according to Rollin, since infants and other marginal humans do not have a concept of life and death either, "and we would not accept painless killing of them[13]" (2006, 113). This does not automatically lead to the second argument, as animals might have interests which are stronger than continued life (such as the cessation of chronic pain). Rollin does not attempt to solve this issue, but he does insist that a right to life (which is not absolute) is one of the most vital rights that should be instituted to protect animals' vital interests (2006, 110).

[12] Rights can be seen, in a sense, as the practical application of moral theory. Therefore, I will not delve deeper into this subject.

[13] Please note that this is an excellent example of a rational extension of an intuitive moral appraisal, which is very common in deontological animal ethics.

Singer argues that the interests of some (intelligent) animals are more important than the lives of some (severely retarded) humans (as the fulfilment of these interests has a greater impact on the intelligent beings' welfare) and that the boundary of right to life therefore cannot "run exactly parallel to the border of our own species" (Singer 2009, 19). Instead, species is irrelevant to the question of whether any human or nonhuman animal has a "right to life" (although Singer would not use the term "right" in this sense). The more relevant aspects of a being's life that determine its right to life are, for instance, "a capacity for self-awareness, (…) the ability to plan for the future and have meaningful relations with others" (Singer 2009, 19). On this definition, it would remain more wrong to kill a human than to kill a squirrel, but killing a squirrel would still in itself be wrong, as it has at least some capacity for self-awareness, ability to plan for the future, etc. According to Singer, a problem[14] with this position is that "the severely retarded and hopelessly senile" apparently don't have a right to life and "may be killed for quite trivial reasons" (Singer 2009, 19 – 20).

Višak argues that the most basic premise about the death of animals is that killing an animal that has positive welfare implies a loss of welfare, as it "reduces the quantity of welfare in the outcome, or because it adds to the harm in the outcome, or both" (Višak 2013, 39). Death harms a person if it renders impossible the fulfilment of future-oriented desires or if it takes away possible future value of a person's life; correspondingly, death harms animals that have future-oriented desires or whose future life has (welfare-related) value.

A synthesis

What do we end up with if we combine these various animal ethics? Can utilitarian and deontological animal ethics be combined at all? I believe they can. The result would, in any case, be a consequentialist ethic: all ethics described above are consequentialist in the sense that they do not morally approve or disapprove of any actions in advance. Even the killing of animals is morally justified in some cases: if the animal will certainly have a negative future welfare that cannot be improved by any means, all ethics above would not only condone but demand the killing of that animal. Moral considerations, according to this fusion of theories, would have to take the interests of all affected sentient beings, including (some) animals and future beings, equally into account (the impartiality principle). Beings that have interests have intrinsic value and are given rights, to protect their most vital interests[15].

[14] The reasons Singer finds this conclusion problematic are unclear. According to his own welfarist ethic, there is nothing problematic about killing beings that do not have welfare.
[15] Pure utilitarianism would not protect these and would leave room for exploitation under the guise of welfare maximisation.

Harms and benefits are assessed with regard to individual beings. An action (or another "object of moral evaluation" (Višak 2013, 31), such as a rule) is considered right or wrong on the basis of two criteria: an action would be right if it satisfies both utilitarian demands (i.e., if it is the most efficient way to maximise net welfare), and deontological demands (i.e., if it does not impinge on the "rights" of all that are affected by it). I do not think that there will be many problems in applying both of these demands, as the two criteria would mostly overlap, but conflicts between the demands will at some point arise. In these cases, the deontological demands are given preference (by means of rights). This approach avoids total exploitation of the minority by the majority, but leaves room for maximising welfare.

A definition of sustainability

In order to know whether this general perspective is sustainable, we need to know what sustainability actually means. Three common themes can usually be discerned in nearly all definitions of "sustainability" (Vos 2007). In 2005, the United Nations stated that sustainable development consists of three elements: "economic development, social development and environmental protection" (United Nations General Assembly 2005, 12). Indeed, these three elements[16], the first aspect of sustainability, are shared by virtually all definitions of the concept (Vos 2007, 335).

The most widely used general definition seems to be the one introduced by the United Nations report titled "Our Common Future," most widely known as the "Brundtland Report." It defines sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987, 41). As I am not concerned with *development* per se, but with sustainability in general, I must take from this definition the elements that do not depend on development: an action is sustainable if and only if it does not impair the abilities of current and future generations to meet their needs. This second concern – intergenerational equity[17] – is very common as well (Norton and Toman 1997, 561; Vos 2007, 335). The third common theme in definitions of sustainability – innovation (Vos 2007, 335) – is less relevant for the current purposes, but deserves mentioning.

[16] If one subtracts "development" from these three elements of sustainable development one ends up with economy, society, and environmental protection, the three elements of sustainability.

[17] The philosophical underpinnings of intergenerational equity follow directly from "principles of equal opportunity between contemporaries" (Howarth 1997, 570). Howarth (1997, 570) describes this reasoning most eloquently: "Since successive age cohorts overlap in time, each generation must extend the notion of equal opportunity to its (contemporary) children. By forward recursion, this argument establishes a chain of obligation between the present and long-run future."

Beyond this point there is more disagreement than agreement. In general, two streams of theory can be distinguished: scholars distinguish between weak and strong sustainability. In order to further explain these terms, we must devote some attention to the concepts of "natural capital" and "artificial capital." Natural capital refers to four categories of environmental functions: *sources*, raw materials; *sinks*, assimilative capacities; *life-support systems*, natural phenomena essential to (human) life on Earth; and *amenity services*, aesthetic, artistic or spiritual value (Jones and Jacobs 2007, 176). Artificial (or human-made) capital, in contrast, refers to all material goods that are employed in production processes without being (part of) the output of the relevant processes (Jones and Jacobs 2007, 176).

The main difference between weak and strong sustainability lies in the substitutability that is ascribed to natural and artificial capital. Weak sustainability would argue that natural and artificial capital are endlessly substitutable (Jones and Jacobs 2007, 177; Norton and Toman 1997, 555; Toman 1992, 4). A system would be sustainable when a loss in natural capital is always compensated by a gain in artificial capital of equal or greater value, or, conversely, when a loss in artificial capital is always compensated by a gain in natural capital of equal or greater value.

Strong sustainability, on the other hand, would argue that natural and artificial capital are not endlessly substitutable, for several reasons (Jones and Jacobs 2007, 181 – 182; Norton and Toman 1997, 555; Toman 1992, 4). For example, some natural resources are so essential to the preservation of life on Earth (e.g. the ozone layer) or provide indispensible resilience against unexpected disasters (e.g. biodiversity) that they should be kept intact at all costs. Another limitation is the physically unavoidable inefficiency of substitution that leads value (energy) to be lost in the process, which means that substitution cannot possibly be endless (Jones and Jacobs 2007, 179). Furthermore, the (long-term) effects of substitution are not always clear: unknown thresholds may be reached that lead systems to change drastically and presumably unfavourably (Jones and Jacobs 2007, 43).

This does not mean that substitution is never allowed (a position that has been termed "absurdly strong sustainability"; Howarth 1997, 575). It is possible when inferences about future costs and benefits can be made with high certainty and when benefits for current and future generations outweigh the costs. A good example would be geothermal energy production, which substitutes a natural energy resource for an artificial one, and which has clear benefits for both present and future at very limited costs. In some cases, however, this inference cannot be made (with certainty), as with some other energy sources that may have unpredictable future consequences. In these cases, it would make little sense to employ a cost-benefit approach to intergenerational justice, since costs and benefits cannot be determined (Howarth 1997, 576). Instead, in these cases we should use a

rights-based criterion; "inalienability rules[18]" (Howarth 1997, 576) are used to delineate what is rightfully not ours.

Disagreement is also prevalent on aspects of intergenerational justice. Usually, in deciding about intergenerational tradeoffs, present and future costs and benefits are calculated "according to some representative set of individual [current] preferences" (Toman 1992, 4), but future costs and benefits are discounted by some factor (the discount rate) to determine their present value. This means that in current decision-making, future costs and benefits have relatively little value relative to present costs and benefits, and mostly short-term costs and benefits prevail (Jones and Jacobs 2007, 139). This discordance is justified with two arguments: first, people generally give present benefits greater weight than future benefits; and second, current benefits can be used to further increase future benefits (Jones and Jacobs 2007, 138; Toman 1992, 4).

These two arguments, in turn, have been questioned. The first argument and the application of individual current preferences, most philosophers would argue, leads to a dominance of the present generation over future generations in a way that is incompatible with both utilitarian and deontological principles of impartiality, and is thus immoral (Howarth 1997, 571; Toman 1992, 4). The second argument is questionable as well, because many natural resources are of limited supply (Toman 1992, 4). Therefore, the application of a positive discount rate leads to an undervaluing of future environmental costs relative to short-term economic benefits and can hence be profoundly environmentally destructive, according to Jones and Jacobs (2007, 139).

Another problem focuses on what it is that needs to be sustained. Costanza and Patten argue that we should consider a "nested hierarchy of systems [a metasystem] over a range of time and space scales" (1995, 196). Any large system consists of many subsystems (e.g. ecosystems consist of individual species; species consist of individual organisms), which have a limited longevity compared to the overarching system. This facilitates evolution: "evolution cannot occur unless there is limited longevity of the component parts so that new alternatives can be selected" (Costanza and Patten 1995, 196). We should therefore not aim to sustain any system indefinitely, since this compromises evolution. On the other hand, we should also not adopt the view that sustainability consists of reducing the lifespan of the individual components or of the overarching system as much as possible to facilitate evolution; as this will negatively influence the longevity of the metasystem.

[18] Howarth (1997, 56) describes the inalienability of certain resources as follows: "Inalienability entails that certain property rights are not institutionally subject to the calculus of substitution-with-compensation that justifies cost-benefit analysis."

Sustainability consists of letting every system attain its "normal" or "natural" lifespan: "a system is sustainable if and only if it persists in nominal behavioural states as long as or longer than its *expected natural longevity or existence time"* (italics mine; Costanza and Patten 1995, 195). The results of an imbalance in longevity across systems are either brittleness, when components attain supernatural longevity relative to the system's lifespan, which constrains adaptation, or unsustainability, when the components' or system's longevity is discontinued unnecessarily prematurely (Costanza and Patten 1995, 196). In both cases, the metasystem collapses, which harms the interests of all component systems (that have interests) and should therefore be considered morally undesirable. In other words, facilitating evolution is of instrumental moral value.

Assessment and conclusion

How sustainable is the theoretical perspective formulated above? In the previous chapter I have noted that environmental protection is a key element in most definitions of sustainability. The perspective formulated above might raise some concerns in this respect. It states that ecosystems, species, etc. for which nothing "matters" in the sense that their welfare is not affected by any changes in the environment (indeed, they cannot even be said to have welfare), do not have interests (Rollin 2006, 129). While it can be said that individual sentient beings inside ecosystems and species have interests that should – when appropriate – be taken into account in moral considerations, this cannot be said of ecosystems and species themselves. Ecosystems, species etc. do not have intrinsic value, as having intrinsic value is based on having interests. In fact, according intrinsic value to "nature" in general or to individual insentient natural objects such as trees, as some have done (notably the deep ecologist Arne Næss; 1973), is inconsistent with the ethic described above. While, as has been argued, there are no morally relevant criteria for excluding sentient animals from our (mostly human-directed) moral concern, there are certainly morally relevant criteria[19] for excluding insentient life from it. The perspective formulated above might therefore be viewed as catastrophic for environmental concerns.

This, in fact, is not the case. Many things that do not have interests are themselves an interest of sentient beings. Interests have instrumental value, which, according to Rollin, can be conceived of in a broad sense; aesthetic value to humans is a prominent example (2006, 139). The quality of the environment, for instance, is of instrumental value to most (if not all) sentient beings. It is, however, not an object of moral concern, as it does not have interests itself. Accordingly, it does not have intrinsic value, as nothing matters to it. But this should not be an issue, because, as Rollin argues,

[19] Please refer to the chapter "Inclusion" for an overview of these.

“there is nothing to be gained by attempting to elevate the moral status of nonsentient natural objects to that of sentient ones” (2006, 138). As has been explained earlier, interests are being taken into account in moral considerations. One can imagine the proliferation of species of sentient animals to rest on the protection of the interests of the individual animals within them and the protection of individual plant life to hinge upon the protection of the interests of the sentient beings that depend on or benefit from their continued existence. Ascribing instrumental value to natural objects will ensure protection as good as claiming they have intrinsic value, and the former makes much more sense in light of the “consensus ethical ideal” (Rollin 2006, 44) than the latter. Natural objects will therefore almost invariably enter our moral deliberations, because of “the far-reaching and sometimes subtle instrumental value these objects have for humans and animals” (Rollin 2006, 141).

I have also noted that intergenerational equity is a part of the definition of sustainability. The perspective formulated above endorses the impartiality principle, which states that “each counts for one and none for more than one” (Višak 2013, 31), which means that the interests of future sentient beings are fully taken into account in moral considerations. This rules out the act of “discounting”, which, as has been mentioned, “departs from the premise of impartiality that underlies both utilitarian and deontological ethical reasoning and is therefore strongly contested by moral philosophers” (Howarth 1997, 571) and can be profoundly unsustainable.

The composite animal ethical perspective formulated above scores quite well on matters of intergenerational equity. It would not morally approve of actions that would trump the needs of current and future generations of sentient beings without compensation. Another aspect of sustainability is what needs to be sustained. I have argued that we should enable each system to attain its normal or natural life span. In its moral rejection of the killing of animals that have positive net future welfare, the animal ethic described in a previous chapter certainly conforms to this demand. The perspective formulated above is also fully compatible with strong sustainability, which argues that natural and artificial capital are not endlessly substitutable. In fact, the protection of the interests of all (future) sentient beings that have positive welfare is a key element of this perspective. Therefore, I would argue that animal ethical theories in general, of which the above perspective can be considered a distillate, are indeed sustainable.

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