

TONY CHADWICK PRIZE 1995 WINNING ESSAY

STAMPING ON FLOWERS

by Peter Gibson

It is a particular feature of twentieth century thinking about morality that its *scope* seems to be a central problem. Who or what should be the objects of our moral concern? The source of this interest is not hard to find, as the legalised miseries of Nazi Germany and apartheid South Africa have made it obvious that racial prejudice is a key cause of human unhappiness. Less predictable, but not less striking, has been the rapid growth of concern for the suffering of animals, which seems to have its roots in the decline of a Christian view that animals exist entirely for the benefit of humanity, and the rise of evolutionary theory and utilitarianism (especially in the English-speaking world), which have invited us to take as much (or *nearly* as much) interest in the suffering of animals as of humanity. At this point philosophers should step back to look at the general trend found here, and see where this tendency to broaden our moral scope might take us.

The obvious question that beckons is ‘what *should* be the scope of morality?’ We can start with a simple list, arranged in a common sense order, in order to test our feelings:

1. No scope at all, because morality is an illusion
2. Just me within the scope, because (face it) all morality is basically selfish
3. Me and my family and friends, because only they affect my life
4. My local community, of work, local amenities, neighbours, and people with a similar dialect and culture
5. My nation, defined in legal terms
6. My religion, or political loyalty, or language, or race, or sex, or some other trans-national group
7. Western civilisation, with its commitment to democracy, freedom of thought, and the scientific world view
8. The whole of the human race
9. Humanity, plus domesticated animals
10. Humanity, plus all larger mammals
11. Humanity, plus all larger animals
12. Humanity, plus any animals which contribute usefully to the biosphere

Etcetera... If we hold back the intriguing question of where this list might terminate, let us consider what we have so far. The first two suggestions have their supporters, but they effectively deny moral behaviour, which is here taken for granted. The next five suggestions (three to seven) can also find some interesting support, perhaps from a version of a social contract within a recognised community, or some sort of Darwinism founded on theories of kin selection. Unfortunately these views are also besmirched with the behaviour of rampant imperialists, whose scope of morality seems to have been dictated by the idea that in order to qualify for moral treatment you have to be ‘civilised’, this being defined in an intolerantly narrow and European-centred way. Leaving those views aside, then, we come to number eight, which may well be the most widely believed view since 1945, embodied in such documents as the United Nations’ *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (passed by the General Assembly in 1948). The first two Articles, for example, read as follows:

Article 1. All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

Article 2. Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.....

But what about animals? They lack most of the kitemarks of moral value that are listed by the General Assembly, and Peter Singer and his more practical followers have made it almost inconceivable that we should accept a massive effort of concern for our fellow humans, while neglecting animals, or even torturing them just for fun (because they failed to qualify).

So it looks as if the new standard view is going to be somewhere near the bottom of the list. But this is where it becomes interesting. The only useful guideline we seem to have here is utilitarianism. Mill says that “all of sentient creation” is within the scope of morality¹, and this focuses our attention on slugs, oysters, lice, jellyfish, very small insects, and large bacteria.

Of course, nothing becomes necessarily sacrosanct simply because it is within the scope of morality. We might still think it expedient to execute murderers (as Mill did, on vaguely plausible utilitarian grounds), or to eat sentient animals (after a death of minimum pain). A fat Scotch salmon may be entitled to moral consideration because it seems to have a sentient nervous system, but still seems to be worth killing because it tastes so good. We are unlikely to submit ourselves to disease, just because we learn that some hostile bacterium registers a slight flicker of discomfort when it is exterminated by my lymphocytes. I may have a high moral regard for the Beast of Bodmin, but still have no conscience if I am required to kill it in defence of my family.

But if I am going to kill something, even though it comes within the scope of my morality, what is the *benefit* of falling within it? ‘Big deal’, say the animals. The answer might be that although there are some things you *can* do to a Scotch salmon, there are others that you *can't*. You can't chop off one of its fins to see whether it swims in circles. You can't kill it, and then throw it in the dustbin.

In short, a salmon, and all sentient creation, should be treated with *respect*. Just as a good dentist will treat me with respect, even when warning me that his or her next action may hurt a bit.

But if *respect* is the central concept of our newly established moral orthodoxy, how will this work at the outer reaches of my moral scope? If I must treat slugs, wasps and oysters with respect, no matter what actual usage of them we are led into by expediency, then what should be my attitude to things which fall *outside* the agreed boundary? How should I treat plants, pieces of crystal, robots, and human artefacts?

It doesn't take much thought to see that we are going wrong here. Suppose I am handling a small, exquisite insect with loving care, lifting it away from some danger, and placing it on a leaf of its favourite food. An eminent biologist passes, comments that he has just won a Nobel Prize for research into these creatures in which he has demonstrated that they are undoubtedly incapable of any feeling of pain. I promptly tear the wings off the creature, stamp on it, and walk away laughing. I inform the biologist that I am a philosopher, and am merely demonstrating the new moral orthodoxy of our age.

What has gone wrong? I was overflowing with respect for the insect. I then learned that it did not in fact pass the test which would qualify it for my respect. I therefore switched off my respect, and gave myself the wicked pleasure of a touch of cruelty. But respect which can be switched on or off depending on whether the recipient has received high enough marks in my exam doesn't seem like true respect.

The perfect embodiment of true respect is found in the Chaucerian term *gentillesse*. And what do we read of the Knight?

*He nevere yet no vileynye ne sayde
In al his lyf unto no maner wight.
He was a verray, parfit gentil knyght.*

He is polite to everyone. He isn't polite to other knights, and rude to peasants. A person of true *gentillesse* will be polite to a captured criminal, as well as to the victims. We can't imagine the knight behaving destructively to the insentient insect.

The real test case, then, is how we should treat things which we judge to be *outside* our supposed scope of morality. For example, I am walking in remote woodlands in northern Finland, where no one ever goes. I find an unglamorous little flower hidden beneath some leaves. I carefully lift a leaf, stamp on the flower very thoroughly, and carefully replace the leaf. Kant said that this action was wrong for two reasons.² Firstly, the destruction of inanimate objects deprives our fellow humans of possible benefits, and secondly, we develop in ourselves bad habits which may be turned against our fellow humans. In other words, there is nothing wrong with my flower-stamping *in itself*. But Kant seems to have missed the point. This particular flower will never have a human use, and I may expect to be a much kinder person now that I have got this streak of cruelty out of my system - but I still shouldn't do it.

The reason is obvious - it is because I will be a less good person if I give in to such a temptation. Flower-stampers are not good role models; they do not embody our ideal of how people should be. Once we reach this thought, the whole of the previous discussion about the scope of morality, and the question of what qualifies for moral treatment, is seen to have missed the crucial point of all morality. **Whether I treat things with respect should be nothing to do with whether they deserve that respect, but whether I am a respectful person.** Do I treat things with respect *before* I have evaluated them? Do I treat the undergrowth with respect *before* I have checked to see whether it contains beautiful flowers? Do I treat strangers with respect *before* I have decided whether they are nice, or sensitive, or likely to respect me, or a contracted member of my social group?

There are no great surprises in this conclusion, which will lead us on to a very Greek interest in the virtues, as well as a very contemporary tendency to see ourselves as humble parts of a large and complex biosphere, where even inanimate things have an important part to play. (One of the virtues, of course, might be to withhold respect from rational beings who have forfeited it.)

What it should lead us to is a rejection of any tendency to selfishness which might be found in an Aristotelian pursuit of our own *eudaimonia*. It should lead to a rejection of any sense that morality is only about my relationships with other rational agents, or with members of some community with whom I have made a social agreement. It will certainly reject any view that only the increase of happiness matters, irrespective of who (or what) brings about that happiness.

Above all it will lead to a rejection of the deep-ingrained habit of passing judgement on everyone and everything, as a cautious (or even hostile) preliminary to my deciding on my moral attitude towards it.

If I get it right, I will merely find myself at the point which Hamlet reached much earlier:

Polonius: *My lord, I will use them [the actors] according to their desert.*

Hamlet: *God's bodkin man, much better. Use every man after his desert, and who shall scape whipping? Use them after your own honour and dignity.*³

If our moral priority is our 'own honour and dignity', rather than the 'desert' of the person, animal, plant or object with which we are dealing, the question of where to draw the line in our moral scope will disappear. It won't solve the problem of how to behave well, but it will show us where to look in making proper evaluations.

I have found one objection to my proposal, in Mary Midgley's interesting article 'Duties Concerning Islands'⁴, where she comments that "Anyone who refrained from cruelty merely from a wish not to sully his own character, without any direct consideration for the possible victims, would be frivolous and narcissistic". This, though, is inconsistent with her arguments elsewhere in her article, that Robinson Crusoe has duties to his (insentient) ecosphere, and should be at least partially concerned with moral treatment for unfeeling crystals and rivers, as well as more sensitive parts of creation. The answer would seem to be that anyone who refrains from the destruction of flowers, from experiments on salmon, and from rudeness to criminals, on the grounds that it demeans their "own honour and dignity", will attempt to refrain from foolish frivolity and narcissism for exactly the same reason.

1. J.S.Mill: *Utilitarianism*, ed. M.Warnock (Fontana 1962) p.263
2. Lectures on Ethics: '*Duties Towards Inanimate Objects*'
3. Act II, Scene 2, Line 523
4. *Encounters*, 60/2 1983; also in *Ethics*, ed. Peter Singer (OUP 1994)