What's More Important?

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Twenty-five years ago, Tom Regan argued that people who use animals as a means to satisfying human ends commit the *faux pas* of denying that animals have a value other than that instrumental value:

> It would be wrong to treat [marginal] humans merely as a means because it would fail to acknowledge and respect the fact that they are the subjects of a life whose value is logically independent of any other being’s taking an interest in it. … The subjects of a more or less good life have value that is logically independent of their being valued as a means by anyone else. … All those beings (and only those beings) which have inherent value have rights. … It is difficult at best to understand how anyone could reasonably deny that there are many, many species of animals whose members satisfy this requirement. ¹

Doubtless there were then and still are many people who unreflectively believe that the only value animals have is their usefulness for satisfying human interests.

> It seems equally obvious that there are many people who recognize that animals feel pleasure and pain and even “want to live”—i.e., are “subjects of a life”—yet who are morally comfortable with sacrificing animals as means to fulfilling human ends. The many and long-standing laws against cruelty to animals testify to the ubiquity of the belief that animals can suffer. Whether animals fear death independently of suffering may be more controversial, but the fact that defenders of our killing animals for human benefit have felt the need to caution that animals who seem to be fleeing or fighting against death may really be attempting to avoid what they perceive to be a threat of pain at least suggests that the belief in animals wanting to live is also widespread. And since these beliefs are common, there is a significant part of the animal-using population that does not commit the blunder that Regan and others have so ably attacked.

My very broad, guiding, question here is: is there a failure of reasoning involved in holding both of the following beliefs?

- B1: Animals have value independently of the usefulness they have for satisfying human interests, namely the value their experiences and/or lives have for them.
- B2: It is morally permissible for us routinely to sacrifice their interests in using animals to satisfy human needs and wants.

One way of understanding how people who are both morally conscientious and aware of the psychological capacities of animals can hold both these beliefs is that they also believe in a “priority principle”—i.e., a principle which assigns comparative weights to competing values—and that this principle assigns greater weight to human values than to animal values. If that is correct,
then the legitimacy of believing both B1 and B2 depends on the legitimacy of the priority principle one accepts, i.e., its coherence, accuracy, relevance, and moral acceptability.

The majority of this essay will be devoted to discussing those sorts of issues concerning several priority principles. However, before entering into that discussion, I want, first, to critically discuss a philosophically sophisticated challenge to B1, at least as far as that belief concerns animals’ lives (rather than their experiencing pleasure and pain). Then, I want to raise what I hope is a philosophically sophisticated question about a common presumption underlying B2.

I.

Concerning species whose existence is not endangered, the prevalent belief in Western culture is that our sole moral obligation to animals is to minimize suffering in our use of them. This belief has been challenged on the ground that death itself—whether painful or not—is a misfortune for animals. In turn, this has been challenged on the ground that although animals may seem to disvalue death, they do not really do so—indeed, they cannot do so. This is because

- B3: they lack the cognitive ability to understand “death” as the cessation of life as a temporally-extended thread of experiences and
- B4: things which are not affective experiences like pleasure and pain have value only as the objects of evaluations or evaluative experiences, such as fear and desire.

As Ruth Cigman put it, in denying that animals can have a right to life:

For a creature to be a possible subject of the misfortune of death, life itself must be an object of value for it. … When we fill in the concept of desiring not to die in a way which is relevant to the misfortune of death and right to life, we shall have to withhold this from animals. 2

It follows that the sole value of animal death is the value it has for beings capable of understanding and evaluating death, i.e., human beings.

A sufficient response to this argument is that it oversimplifies how things acquire value. This is so even if we agree, as I do, that ultimately things which are not themselves affective experiences acquire value through their relation to such experiences. The position outlined above assumes that death acquires value only through being the object of explicit evaluation or evaluative experience: e.g., death acquires negative value when it is feared. However, the relations through which things, including death, acquire value are more varied than that. For instance, things can be of value for individuals by causing them pain or eliminating their pleasures, even though they are unaware of this. Such is the case with the negative value of eating lead paint for children. Similarly, since life is a necessary condition for experiencing pleasure, death is of negative value for children even though they, like animals, do not understand what “death” is. Just as something can be in someone’s interest even though s/he takes no interest in it—because it impacts her/his well-being without her/his knowing this—so something can be of value for someone without her/his evaluating it.

Sometimes, this sort of analysis is criticized as opening up a Pandora’s Box of counter-intuitive “values,” e.g., that gasoline is valuable for tractors and water for mud. Some ways of developing
this sort of analysis may lead to such conclusions; however, here we have stressed that values arise through causal, necessary-condition, and other productive/disruptive/modifying relations to affective experiences, and we can strengthen that limitation by making that a *necessary* condition: things which are not themselves affective experiences acquire value by and only by their impact on such experiences. So, for example, the value of gasoline for a tractor derives from and only from the (actual, standard, presumed, projected, or other) impact of the tractor’s running (or being clean or whatever else the gasoline does (will do, could do) to or for the tractor) on the affective experiences of sentient beings. The elements in parentheses indicate the multi-dimensional complexity of the relations that are possible while still acknowledging that *ultimately* values exist by and only by the relation of things (including actions, rules, institutions, communities, etc.) to affective experiences. Being the object of an evaluative experience such as fear or desire is one such relation—one which requires some understanding of what is thereby of value to the individual—but it is only one of a variety of value-giving relations, some of which do not require such understanding. Consequently, that animals cannot understand death—*if* they cannot—does not entail that their lives cannot be of value for them, a value—as claimed in B1—*independent* of the instrumental value those lives have for fulfilling human interests.

II.

A common presumption underlying our treatment of animals is that where animal pleasures and pains are concerned, our moral obligation is limited to minimizing the suffering they endure at our hands. I want to set aside the presumptiveness of that belief and raise the question whether our moral obligation extends to trying to better the lives of animals in our care. (I understand “obligation” here in the common, looser sense in which it can cover what some philosophers prefer to label “virtues” or “supererogatory values” rather than “obligations.” Our commonly recognized “obligation” to donate to charity is an example. I think the idea of this sense of “obligation” is that of a moral force counterbalancing our inclination toward self-interest, be that the force of principles of duty or of ideals of virtue.)

In our relations with other humans, our moral obligations concerning others’ lives commonly extend beyond minimizing the suffering we inflict on them. For example, parental obligation to children is not limited to not beating or starving them, working them to exhaustion, or otherwise causing them to suffer. Similarly, a great deal of humanitarian work is based on our having a moral obligation to improve the quality of others’ lives, e.g., through education, liberation, and medical treatment. If a child who is otherwise capable of leading a normal life is curably blind or has some life-shortening heart defect, also curable, and if we have the ability to provide that cure (without compromising our own quality of life), is there not a moral obligation to provide that cure? Certainly, someone who when confronted with such a situation refused to help would be considered morally inferior to someone who helped.

By analogy, it may be than our moral obligation to animals in our care is not limited to minimizing the suffering we inflict on them; it may extend to not harming them and to protecting, even ameliorating their lives. When we kill healthy animals in their prime, depriving them of years of positive experiences, we would fail in such an obligation, even if we kill them with a reasonable minimum of pain. This is at least a sufficiently coherent possibility that we should not just presume there is no such obligation.
Two attempts to pick up that challenge and explicitly defend that presumption run as follows:

- B5: Trying to maximize the pleasure of possible lives would lead to gross impracticalities and counter-intuitive obligations—such as an obligation to breed as many marginally happy children as possible.
- B6: Since the animals in our care that we kill, such as food animals, are bred by us to be killed, our moral obligation is limited to providing them good lives consistent with our killing them when doing so serves our purpose (the purpose that gives them any life at all).

B5 occurs in utilitarian discussions, where it may have some purchase as a counter-example to the principle of utility. However, this is not such a discussion. I am not presuming we have an obligation to maximize the excess of pleasure over pain in the world. I am simply pointing out that common Western moral beliefs acknowledge moral obligations not only not to cause others to suffer but also to protect, even ameliorate their lives, including extending normal life (as in the case of infants with curable birth defects). Given that our moral repertoire thus extends beyond obligations not to act negatively to obligations to act positively, at the very least some discussion is needed to show why ordinarily only the negative obligations apply to our relations with animals.

The moral significance of being purpose-bred, as developed in B6, might be put forward as justifying this limitation on our obligations to animals. However, since people, too, can be purpose-bred, that position leads to the following, damning counter-example: we are justified in treating as slaves those we have caused to be born to be slaves, for if it were not for that purpose, they would not exist at all. The same could be said for people enslaved after losing a war, if enslaving them was our reason for not killing them. Expressed abstractly, what is wrong with attaching such moral significance to being purpose-bred or purposed-maintained is that doing so amounts to contending that doing something to people which would otherwise be immoral becomes morally acceptable when it is done to people who are brought into or maintained in existence in order to be thus treated. Since B6 embodies such a morally unacceptable principle, it cannot provide a credible demonstration of why only negative moral obligations apply to our treatment of animals. Unless some credible explanation is forthcoming, limiting our positive moral obligations to humans remains merely a presumption. And since it has for us the obvious benefit of providing moral cover for our exploiting beings within our power, it seems to be an assumption that is motivated and maintained by self-interest.

III.

Abstractly, believing both B1 and B2—that animals' experiences and lives have value for them but that, nonetheless, it is morally okay for us to sacrifice animals for our benefit—is problematic because of the following sort of conflict:

- i. L has different values for A and for H, and
- ii. our treating L according to the value it has for A is incompatible with treating it according to the value it has for H and vice versa.

Put more concretely, with a focus on animal lives:

- i. Their lives have for sentient animals the value of a necessary condition for positive
experiences, e.g., pleasure and fulfillment, while they have for humans the instrumental value of something the destruction of which can contribute to satisfying our interests, e.g., in food and clothing, and

ii. dealing with (normal) sentient animals according to the value their lives have to them would lead us to preserve their lives, while dealing with them according to the value their lives have for us would lead us to sacrifice those lives.

How should we resolve this conflict? I use the word “should” here to indicate this is a moral question, which I understand to be a question in which our interests are not presumed to be weightier than others’ interests. As mentioned in our discussion of how morally-concerned people can hold both B1 and B2, one way to answer this sort of question is to find or create a morally acceptable priority principle and apply that principle to this case. (In that discussion, of course, the priority principle had to be one which gave priority to human interests; here, presuming how the principle must assign priority would be a prejudice.)

Two priority principles which unfortunately point in opposite directions but, nonetheless, have the virtue of being structural, and therefore applicable to any moral tradition or theory, come readily to mind:

P1: The value something has as an object of evaluation has priority over the value it has indirectly for affective experiences, e.g., as a necessary condition for those experiences.

P2: Necessary condition values have priority over instrumental values.

P1 would be attractive to those philosophers of mind who tend toward restricting values to being the “products” of evaluative acts, but it has morally dubious implications. For example, it entails that (ceteris paribus, of course) what adults want has priority over what babies need and that the value pollution has for business executives to produce desired profits outweighs its value as a cause of diseases and deformities for its uncomprehending victims. Such consequences are sufficient to discredit P1.

P2’s appeal probably derives from the immediate impression that what is “necessary” should have priority over what is merely “instrumental.” However, that impression will not survive even a little analysis. For example, a source of fuel, such as oily rags, is a necessary condition for combustion, while eliminating the fuel, e.g., by throwing out a pile of such rags, has only instrumental value—is sufficient but not necessary—for preventing a fire; nonetheless, it does not follow that the former value has priority over the latter—indeed, a concern with safety leads to the opposite conclusion. Whether a necessary condition value has priority over an instrumental value here and elsewhere depends on the negative versus positive value of what the condition is necessary for and what the instrumentally valued can produce. Even where both “products” are positively valued, the instrumental can have priority over the necessary if what the former produces is more valuable than what the latter produces. For example, staying in the small town of one’s childhood may be necessary for maintaining close ties with high school friends while going off to college, world travel, and living for decades in metropolitan areas may have “only” instrumental value for developing one’s mind, personality, and understanding, yet if such development is valued over that maintenance, the instrumental will have priority over the necessary. So, P2 meets the same fate as P1; i.e., neither is a credible priority principle.
Adopting a utilitarian perspective can yield the following priority principle:

P3: Following that value which will lead to the greatest happiness for the greatest number has priority over following other values.

P3 would give priority to the instrumental value animal lives have for us (and thereby render B1 and B2 compatible), if our routinely sacrificing animal interests to satisfy human interests leads to the greatest happiness of the greatest number. However, that is not at all obvious; indeed, since in most all cases sacrificing animal interests is not the only way to satisfy human needs or wants, it is probable that courses of action which fulfill both animal and human interests will lead to the greatest happiness of the greatest number. (That would render B1 and B2 incompatible. Since P3 is anchored in the well-established place of maximizing happiness in common Western morality, that is a significant conclusion, and not just for utilitarians. This conclusion indicates at least a logical tension in common Western morality, since believing that B1 and B2 are compatible is also a well-established part of that morality.)

P3 is, of course, just a restatement of Bentham’s principle of utility and as such shares in the strengths and weaknesses of that principle. Unfortunately, a couple of those weaknesses render proceeding beyond the tentative conclusion of the preceding paragraph highly speculative. First, it is not possible actually to measure happiness and come up with verifiable quantifications of pleasure and pain, especially when many different kinds of experiences and sentient beings are involved. Though simple arithmetic—a few billion animals killed annually in the United States to feed a few hundred million people—counts against sacrificing animals, open questions about the intensity, propinquity, purity, etc., of feelings of pleasure/pain or fulfillment/frustration and about indirect and extended consequences of individual actions, rules for action, institutions, etc., provide wiggle room for utilitarians to speculate and speculate until it is not at all clear—and never can be clear—what course of action will maximize happiness. Second, though Bentham’s principle of utility is classic, how it is to be interpreted is far from obvious. Are “qualities” or other hierarchies of pleasure and pain to be countenanced (contra Bentham himself), or only quantities, and should the count be of pleasures and pains or of fulfillments and frustrations? Are only currently existing individuals to be counted, or are impacts on future generations to be considered? Are lost opportunities for happiness or only actually felt pleasures/pains or fulfillments/frustrations to be considered? Are we to focus just on maximization, or minimization, or complex balancings of both? The varieties of utilitarianism may be as myriad as the varieties of pleasure and provide as much wiggle room for irresolvable speculation.

Thus, while failing to impartially consider whether human interests can be fulfilled without sacrificing animal interests is a failure of moral reasoning—since avoiding unnecessary suffering (including loss) is non-controversially a part of common Western morality—adopting P3 as our priority principle would likely lead to the same inconclusiveness, when detailed calculations and resolutions are sought, that plagues utilitarianism in its other incarnations. Nonetheless, operating at the macroscopic level, P3 clearly puts the burden of proof on those who are morally comfortable with sacrificing animals for human interests—both because of the possibility of courses of action that satisfy both human and animal interests and because the number of animals destroyed is so vastly greater than the number

of humans served. The inconclusiveness at the detailed level then counts as a failure to meet that burden and, consequently, counts against the compatibility of B1 and B2.

Another priority principle which could attract a significant moral following, especially among those who emphasize compassion or caring, is:

**P4**: Life-preserving values have priority over life-destroying values.

While P4 is an inspirational principle which can provide guidance in some situations—e.g., in choosing between peaceful and militaristic solutions to political problems—environmental philosophers would pounce on P4’s naiveté where inter-species relations are the issue. They would point out that the natural order is based on a food chain wherein preserving one life requires destroying another. The choice cannot be between destroying or not destroying life but only about which lives are destroyed. If humans do not eat animals, they must eat plants, and if animals are not killed for human food, those animals will eat plants and/or other animals. This objection renders P4 irrelevant to our concerns here.

Nonetheless, environmental philosophers themselves adopt a version of P4 when they give priority to courses of action that preserve or enhance the variety of life on earth over those which reduce that variety. This environmentally more sophisticated priority principle seems a more likely candidate for us:

**P4e**: Variety-of-life-protecting-or-enhancing values have priority over variety-of-life-reducing values.

Since so many of our daily activities, including farming and ranching practices, adversely impact the variety of life, P4e could provide much specific, environmentally sophisticated guidance. P4e would render B1 and B2 compatible when *but only when* our routine sacrificing of animal interests for our benefit does not conflict with animals contributing to maintaining and enhancing the variety of life on earth. Subsistence hunting and fishing, especially if focused on weaker animals, and even small-scale animal husbandry as practiced on traditional “family farms” would seem to meet that criterion. Indeed, this is a position which many environmental philosophers have embraced.

Unfortunately, this way of rendering B1 and B2 compatible is chimerical. B1 refers to animals having value independently of their having value for fulfilling human interests. According to P4e, this independent value is their contribution to enhancing the variety of life on earth. But what is the value of that variety? In common Western morality, that variety has value for us, either directly—as the object of aesthetic or other positive affective experiences—or instrumentally—as a mean to maximizing human fulfillments in the long-term. But, of course, anchoring the value of the variety of life in human interests renders P4e irrelevant to our discussion, since B1 requires a value independent of those interests.

Stepping outside common Western morality, we could speculate that the variety of life on earth has value to all sentient life as a means to the fulfillment of sentient interests in the long-term. This is a speculation, both because the science here is speculative and because environmental philosophy contemplates sacrificing sentient animals to protect and proliferate
non-sentient plants. It is possible that the variety of life on earth could be increased by reducing the number of animals while increasing the variety of plants. Furthermore, if the value of the variety of life is derivative, so is its priority. A useful means to an unimportant end is itself (to that extent) unimportant. It follows that ultimately questions and principles regarding priority need to focus on ends rather than means. Here, since the end is fulfilling sentient interests, the ultimate priority principle is not P4e but something like P3, the priority principle based on the principle of utility already discussed.

Finally, we could claim that enhancing the variety of life on earth is good regardless of any connections that might have to affective experiences. A great deal of environmental philosophy reads as if this is a common belief among environmental philosophers. Nonetheless, it is a logically indefensible position, as David Hume demonstrated many years ago. Consider a world in and regarding which there never were, are not, and never will be any pleasures or pains, satisfactions or frustrations, fears or desires, etc., but which has a greater variety of life than another, similarly un-affective world; how argue that the former has greater value? And without argument, simply insisting that greater variety yields greater value is to confuse fact with value. As a matter of fact, both worlds simply are what they are, different but neither more nor less valuable than the other. So, unless there is some other, plausible basis for the value of the variety of life asserted in P4e, its apparent reconciliation of B2 with B1 fails.

We may also note that although environmentally more sophisticated than P4, P4e is also irrelevant to our concern here, albeit in a different way. As indicated at the beginning, our concern in this essay is with the compatibility of believing that it is morally permissible routinely to sacrifice animal interests for human benefit and that animals are “subjects of a life,” which is why B1 refers to the value animal lives and experiences have for the animals themselves. However, that animals are subjects of a life is irrelevant to the environmental outlook expressed in P4e. There, the independent-of-human-interests value animals have is also independent of their capacities for happiness and suffering. From this perspective, that in using animals to fulfill our interests we sacrifice their happiness, cause them to suffer, and destroy their lives is unproblematic; indeed, such questions are irrelevant to such an environmental morality (unless tied-in indirectly to environmental concerns). Consequently, such an environmental interpretation of the “independent” value of animals cannot answer our concern here.

Another priority principle—one which is relevant to our question—is:

P5: The value something has for the individual to whom it belongs has priority over the value it has for others.

This principle is well-established in our moral tradition, at least in inter-human cases. For example, if you need a kidney to survive, if my kidney is a match, and if there is no other kidney available to transplant before you will die, it is still my choice whether to donate my kidney. The value I place on keeping my kidney trumps even your life-or-death need for that kidney. Even in cases where what is at issue is merely property, e.g., my house or my apples, there is a strong presumption that the value I place on these things has priority over the
value others place on them. This presumption can be overcome in an emergency, of course, as when property is confiscated during a war; this can apply even to one’s life, as when one is drafted into the military and sent to the front during a war. However, such overriding requires a great need and is allowed only as something like a last resort. Such exceptions thus “prove the rule” that this is a very well-established priority principle.\(^7\)

If we were to extend this priority principle to relations between humans and animals, it would obviously follow that acknowledging their lives have value for them (B1) is morally incompatible with routinely sacrificing their interests for our benefit (B2). Other than that it would have this consequence, which many if not most humans would find undesirable, it is not obvious why this extension should not apply.

It might be objected that since animals cannot understand such concepts as “property,” this principle cannot apply to them. However, since property can belong to corporations, children, and Alzheimer’s victims—none of whom can understand that concept—why should such lack of understanding pose an obstacle to animals holding property, especially when what is at issue is just their own lives, bodies, and experiences? Furthermore, it seems a mistake to discuss one’s life, body, and experiences as one’s property. These “belong to” an individual in the sense of being who one is rather than in the sense of what one owns; if we lose our lives, bodies, or experiences, we cease to exist, which is not the case if we lose our property. Consequently, this objection is doubly irrelevant.

However, it might be objected that if “belonging to” is not limited to something like property, P5 will apply to such things as plants, whose lives and bodies “belong to” them in this non-proprietary sense. Even the components of machinery may be “their” bodies in this sense. While this objection suggests that “belongs to” may cover an interesting variety of relations, that variety need not concern us here. This is because P5 asserts a priority for the value something has for the individual to whom it belongs, but since plants are insentient, nothing has value for them, including their lives and whatever else may “belong to” them in any sense whatsoever. The same is true for the parts of machines and other inanimate objects, as already discussed. We can generalize in the following way: any sort of *reductio ad absurdum* objection to P5 (or any other priority principle) based on applying it directly to non-sentient entities will be irrelevant as long as we agree that *ultimately* values derive from affective experiences.

Another possible objection, particularly in these multicultural times, is that giving this priority to what belongs to one is some kind of prejudice, perhaps due to Western exaggerations of the value of individuality and property. But what would be the basis of such a counter-claim? There certainly have been eras and cultures in which this priority principle has not applied to all inter-human relations, e.g., slave-owning societies. However, that obviously does nothing to recommend the counter-argument. And I know of nothing else to supply that recommendation.

Whether P5 is compatible with the principle of utility might be questioned. However, such an incompatibility could be as easily to the detriment of that principle as to P5, since the latter is as commonsensical and as firmly rooted in our Western moral tradition as the former. Also, P5 is compatible with the principle of utility in the same precautionary way L. W. Sumner
argues moral rights are compatible with utility. P5 is a principle we can embrace to protect our interests against sacrifices based on speculative calculations of utility by real human agents, i.e., agents whose knowledge is far from omniscient and whose psychology is far from impartial. P5 can thus help further the goal of maximizing utility by preventing misguided sacrifices.

Another objection is that P5 clearly does not apply to economic values, where the value its owner gives to something need not enjoy priority over the value given to it by an insurance company or prospective buyer. The same is true in art, music, and literature, where the aesthetic value a statue, symphony, or novel has for its creator or current owner need not enjoy priority over the value it has for others. The appropriate response to this objection would seem to be that this difference supports the belief that moral reasoning differs from economic and aesthetic reasoning. Since the moral value of things can vary independently of and even be at odds with their economic or aesthetic value—a notable case being so-called “blood diamonds”—it is not surprising that a principle for resolving moral conflict of values situations would differ from principles for resolving conflicts concerning these other sorts of value.

Unless there is some other, morally significant objection to P5, we have found a well-established, morally credible, relevant, coherent priority principle which indicates that B1 and B2 are incompatible. However, it may be that while P5 clearly indicates such an incompatibility, another, equally well-established priority principle as clearly indicates B1 and B2 are compatible. The following is such a conflicting principle:

P6: The value something has for humans has priority over the value it has for nonhumans.

This principle expresses a version of anthropocentrism. Western moral tradition is definitely anthropocentric—nor is it unusual in being so. And since our common practice is to routinely sacrifice animals for human benefit, in spite of P5, that indicates that P6 is the more fundamental principle for us (as it is for other cultures). Nonetheless, P6 is not beyond objection, even from within our moral tradition.

As indicated earlier, a moral perspective is one in which “our” interests are not presumed to have priority. Such a presumption expresses a moral prejudice, the kind depending on the group “our” refers to, e.g., “racism” referring to the presumption that the interests of members of our race have priority over those of members of other races. It follows that P6 expresses a kind of moral prejudice, frequently called “speciesism,” if it is a presumption.

So, to be morally credible, P6 requires a moral justification, and that justification cannot rely on a presumption of the form “the value something has for members of group X has priority over the value it has for those who are not members of that group,” since the prejudice here lies not in the reference but the form of the presumption. For example, P6 cannot be morally justified by presuming “the value something has for rational beings has priority over the value it has for non-rational beings.” As a presumption such a principle is just another moral prejudice. A non-prejudiced justification for P6 could take the form “giving human values
priority over nonhuman values best accomplishes the moral goal of \( \frac{3}{4} \) (e.g., maximizing the general welfare)” or “that human values should be given priority over nonhuman values is warranted by the moral authority of \( \frac{3}{4} \) (e.g., God). Establishing the accuracy of such claims encounters difficulties ranging from the empirical speculations of utilitarian reasoning to the logical dubiousness of religious claims. At the very least, it is extremely doubtful that a justification for P6 can be put forward which will justify the pervasive role it plays in Western and other moral traditions. The more likely conclusion is that those traditions are based on a priority principle which violates the impartiality which is supposed to be characteristic of morality.

Since I do not have a method for generating all relevant priority principles, I cannot guarantee that this analysis is complete. Nonetheless, I propose to stop this survey here, leaving further discussion for another time. What the above critique of priority principles reveals can be summarized in the following well-supported albeit unguaranteed conclusions:

C1: The least problematic of the priority principles we have considered is P5, but rather than establishing the compatibility of B1 and B2, it indicates that if animals’ lives, bodies, and experiences are of value for them, then routinely sacrificing them for our benefit is not morally permissible.
C2: At the macroscopic level, our utilitarian priority principle (P3) also indicates that B1 and B2 are incompatible, and detailed utilitarian reasoning cannot counter that indication, since it is inconclusive.
C3: Insofar as P6 expresses a presumption of most cultures, it expresses moral prejudice, and the possibility of providing a justification which would remove P6 from the class of prejudices like racism and sexism faces serious difficulties.

Until these three conclusions are refuted or some other well-established, defensible priority principle supporting the compatibility of B1 and B2 is produced, the answer to the guiding question for this essay is that those who believe both B1 and B2 commit a mistake of reasoning—let us call it the fallacy of inverted priority.

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Notes:


3. Here and subsequently, to “presume” need not refer to a conscious act. Consequently, whether or not our interests are presumed to be weightier is a logical issue, rather than a psychological one, although when we deliberate about what morally we ought to do, we frequently are conscious that what is being required of us is that we set self-interest aside, even to the point of self-sacrifice.


6. Any feelings those of us participating in this thought experiment may (as such) have about these worlds are, of course, irrelevant to this discussion.

7. Perhaps the most notable denial of this principle is by opponents of a woman’s right to seek an abortion. Pro-choice advocates seem clearly to endorse the principle as establishing why the value a woman places on how her body is to be used has priority over other values for it. I, at least, am not clear whether pro-life advocates deny the principle in general, believe it is overridden in the extraordinary case of pregnancy, would subscribe to the principle for fetuses as well as women, thus requiring some other solution to this conflict of values situation, or take some other position altogether.


9. It does not follow, of course, that animals cannot be routinely used to fulfill our interests; what follows is that their interests cannot be sacrificed in that use.

10. Racism and other prejudices do, of course, embrace more than just such presumption of interests.

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