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The Philosopher's Stone

Philosophical Discussion Group, Armstrong State University

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THE PHILOSOPHER'S STONE

The Newsletter of the Philosophical Debate Group

On Animal Rights

from the GSU Philosophy Club

Peter Singer, a contemporary ethicist and author of *Animal Liberation*, considers the following case. Suppose an infant is born with irreversible brain damage. The child will always remain a "human vegetable," unable to communicate, to recognize its surroundings or other people, to act independently, or to develop any kind of a self or a concept of itself. The parents realize that the situation is hopeless and, instead of attempting to sustain the infant's life through costly medical procedures, request that doctors painlessly terminate the infant. Legally, of course, doctors are unable to do so, and furthermore many (most?) people would be horrified at the prospect of intentionally killing the infant.

But, as Singer points out, at the same time these very same individuals do not object to killing animals. The question Singer poses is what is the ethical justification for these different judgments? Unlike the severely brain-damaged infant, adult chimpanzees, dogs, pigs, and members of other species can interact with their environments; they are self-aware; they can problem solve; they are intelligent; and they form empathetic bonds with others. Despite our best medical treatment, the brain-damaged infant will never reach the intelligence level of a dog. So is there a morally relevant distinction between killing a brain-damaged human infant and killing animals? According to Singer, to suppose that it is morally wrong to kill the infant but morally permissible to kill animals because the infant is a member of the species *homo sapiens*, whereas chimpanzees, dogs, and pigs are not, is a blatant example of speciesism. For Singer, speciesism is

the morally objectionable view that species membership is morally relevant in our treatment of sentient beings. But, Singer explains, that the fact that I am a member of a given species (*homo sapiens*) is no more morally relevant than my race. To treat creatures differently because they are not members of the species *homo sapiens* is as morally objectionable as treating humans differently because they are not members of a certain race. Speciesism is as bad as racism.

Singer doesn't think that someone who avoids speciesism has to admit that it is just as wrong to kill a pig as it is to kill a fully developed, well-functioning human being. There might be morally relevant differences between pigs and humans that allow us to kill pigs but not humans. If we are to avoid speciesism, however, we must recognize that all beings who are similar in morally relevant respects have an equal right to life. But we should not assume that this set of morally relevant properties will pick out all and only members of our species *homo sapiens*. If we recognize that there are some properties that make the lives of some beings (humans and nonhumans) more valuable than others, we may be forced to admit that the lives of some animals are more valuable than the lives of some humans. For example, the life of a chimpanzee may be more valuable than the life of a severely retarded human infant or someone in the advanced stages of Alzheimer's. To develop a right to life on the basis of a set of morally relevant properties means that an animal may have a strong (if not stronger) claim to the right to life than some human beings.

Finally, on this view, it may turn out to be the case that chimpanzees, dogs, and pigs have a right to life which we egregiously violate when we put them to sleep

when they are old and suffering. Or, it may turn out to be the case that severely mentally retarded or senile human beings lack a strong right to life and can therefore be killed for the same reasons we now use when we kill animals. Two philosophical/ethical questions therefore emerge: first, what are the morally relevant properties (criteria) which grant a creature a right to life; and, secondly, how should we go about consistently applying these criteria in our ethical treatment of humans and animals alike?

Please join the Philosophical Debate Group on Wednesday, November 14 as we discuss the issue of our ethical treatment of animals. Dr. Weiss, professor of philosophy at Georgia Southern, will be leading the discussion. We will meet in Gamble Hall in the Honor's Lounge at 7:30.

Summaries of Previous Meetings

by Eric Verhine

In the joyous month of October the Philosophical Debate Group held two pleasant meetings. Dr. Larry Lesser of the Mathematics Department led a meeting on October 10. The subject of his talk was the relationship of philosophy to mathematics, and of mathematics to philosophy. Philosophy, since its western inception in Greece, has involved itself with mathematics. Numerous "big-name" philosophers were also mathematicians: Pythagoras, Plato, Leibniz, Spinoza, Whitehead, Frege, and Russell.

However, Dr. Lesser approached the subject topically, discussing and leading discussion over some of the following issues. We debated, and of course came to no conclusion, about the nature of mathematics, whether humans discover it or create it. Some maintain that

mathematical laws are conceptual translations of patterns found in the physical universe. Others hold that mathematical laws are merely conceptual grids, frames, or perspectives which thinkers place over reality and which in fact make reality what it is. Change the grid, as moderns changed from the Newtonian to the Einsteinian grid, and one gets not simply a different understanding of reality, but a whole new reality. This problem of whether humans created or discovered mathematics is, obviously, a problem which mathematics itself cannot solve. It is a philosophical problem, and one's solution to the problem, in my opinion, depends primarily on the overall worldview one holds.

The group also discussed the objectivity or absoluteness of mathematical knowledge. In the history of philosophy, thinkers have often given mathematical truth a special status as the unquestionably absolute and objective truth. After all, two plus two must always equal four, right? Well, that is true, but it is only true for one who accepts certain basic assumptions that constitute traditional western mathematics, assumptions that are not themselves demonstrable. The Austrian mathematician Kurt Godel, in his famous "Incompleteness Theorem," showed that the propositions on which any mathematical system is based are themselves unprovable, since it is possible to construct an axiomatic proposition which is neither provable nor unprovable within the system itself.

Dr. Lesser also explained to the group how modern theories of statistics still play out the debate between empiricists and rationalists. He raised many questions regarding values in mathematics and mathematical teaching. We discussed the presumed objectivity of statistics, and noted how all presentations of statistics depend on the subjective choice, framing, and perspective of the statistician. Dr. Lesser helped us to consider how one should teach mathematics, and pointed out that even the teaching of mathematics is not value free or neutral.

We had our second meeting of October in Statesboro. This meeting involved the Philosophy Clubs of Georgia Southern and Savannah State, as well as the gallant Philosophical Debate Group. At this meeting Dr. Nordenhaug gave a lecture entitled "Reflections on Aristotle, Bureaucracy, and Terrorism: Where Has All the Virtue Gone?" Nordenhaug focused primarily on the distinction between Aristotle's reasoning about ethics and modern reasoning. Modern reasoning about ethics is, he said, *methodological*, concentrated on strict rules of morality and on actions and their consequences instead of persons. Aristotle's approach to ethics, called in philosophy a "virtue ethic," concentrates on developing personal character and with that a form of moral wisdom that allows one to react well to new situations. Bureaucrats usually apply methodological reasoning about ethics to the masses. When a problem arises, the bureaucrat thinks that she can solve it by the application of general rule addressing the problem. This form of solution, however, only separates people from their actions, and it fragments their ethical lives from their actual existences. When people no longer feel any connection to their "virtues," but see morality as the mundane and mindless process of following rules established by authorities, they cease to be, according to Aristotle, real human beings. Moreover, the separation of self from virtue and action causes psychological turmoil, which may result in acts of terrorism, such as those done by the Unabomber. Thus, as Nordenhaug noted, the bureaucrat and the terrorist presuppose and fashion one another.

A Glimpse of the Philosophical Future

by Eric Verhine

The approaching Spring semester promises much for an eager, fall weary Philosophical Debate Group. I have prepared several topics for the PDG to debate and discuss. One topic is based on a book I read written by Mark Seltzer called *Wound Culture*. We will discuss why torn or

bloodied bodies and psyches so enamor the American public, why serial killers breathe so well in American air, why so many people tune into *ER*, and numerous other American oddities. Another topic we will discuss is that of meaning. Does life have any meaning at all? What is meaning? How can we justify our claims either that life has meaning or that it has no meaning? A third topic is that of education. We will debate what the nature and aims of (college) education should be, and what practical course of studies or curriculum would serve students best. Other possible topics include sexual ethics, social determinism, the future of capitalism, and certain feminist issues (or whatever else my rootless mind settles on).

However, all the aforementioned topics are only provisional. I would much prefer that other students propose topics for discussion, write the requisite article for *The Philosopher's Stone*, and then lead the group discussion. If you have a topic you would like to propose for discussion, please contact me or Dr. Nordenhaug. I would gladly, with limitless and unwavering jollity, set aside one of my topics for another student's topic.

In addition to PDG meetings proper we have joint meetings with Georgia Southern and Savannah State to look forward to. I plan to work to keep up this union (a president's promise). I have already asked Jack Simmons from Savannah State to lead one meeting next semester; then it will be turn again for an Armstrong professor (probably the jocose Dr. Joe Weaver) to lead a meeting. Whatever comes to be, keep up a keen and systematic watch for each issue of *The Philosopher's Stone*.

If you have any comments, criticisms, or contributions for *The Philosopher's Stone*, please send them to either Eric Verhine or Dr. Nordenhaug.

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