Phil 101. Meeting 25 (Heller)

Some Useful Distinctions

Philosophers distinguish:

- **Suffering** means having unpleasant experiences or emotions, such as pain, fear, grief, shame, or nausea.
- **Being harmed** means having something go badly for you. Suffering is one possible kind of harm, but philosophers disagree about whether people can also be harmed without suffering—for example, by damage to their reputation that they never learn about.
- **Being wronged** means being treated in a morally objectionable way, such that you have a legitimate complaint against the person who treated you that way. Someone might wrong you without causing you to suffer—for example, by secretly violating your privacy. And someone might harm you without wronging you—for example, by performing a painful medical procedure with your consent, or imposing a justified punishment.

Philosophers also distinguish these kinds of claims about a creature:

1. **It has welfare or interests.** Things can go better or worse for it—for example, it might have needs that can be met or unmet; preferences or goals of its own that can be fulfilled, advanced, or frustrated; or experiences that are pleasant or unpleasant.
2. **Its interests matter or "morally count."** Other people have moral reasons to take those interests into account when deciding what to do, even when they conflict with other people's interests. And its interests matter for the creature's own sake, not merely because of their effects on others.
3. **It has rights.** This means others owe it certain kinds of treatment or protection, sometimes even when treating it differently would produce greater benefits overall. But rights need not be **absolute**: sufficiently important competing considerations might sometimes justify overriding them.
4. **It has absolute rights.** These are rights that cannot be overridden by any competing consideration.

Someone might believe that Harambe the gorilla had a right not to be killed, while also believing that killing him was permissible if that was necessary to save a child's life.

Philosophers disagree about exactly what is involved in having rights, and how rights differ from having interests that morally count. Still, it's useful to distinguish morally considering an entity's interests, recognizing rights that give it distinctive protections, and regarding some of those rights as absolute.

Having some rights does not necessarily mean *having all the same rights* as other creatures.

Discussion Questions

1. Suppose fish can experience pain and fear, but have much less sophisticated intellectual capacities than humans. What moral reasons would we have to avoid making them suffer? Would those reasons also count against killing the fish painlessly?

2. A child enjoys violently destroying a lifelike robot that cries out and begs them to stop. Assume that the robot cannot experience anything, and that it belongs to the child. Is there anything morally objectionable about the child's behavior? If so, what makes it objectionable? Has anyone been wronged? If so, who?

3. Suppose we ought to protect chimpanzees. Is this because they have capacities or interests that make them morally important in their own right, or because our greater power gives us responsibilities toward them? Or are both explanations right? Would either explanation also justify protecting fish or robots like those in Q2?