

Philosophy of Life

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Introduction

There are many ideas about how to live, and most people go on living as they have always done without reflecting about what the meaning of life is, and hence nor what they really should work for in their lives. On the contrary, people are working to achieve many different goals, with mixed outcomes to all involved individuals. This document discusses the meaning of life, what the goal of a human's all actions should be, and how these goals can be achieved.

What is the meaning of life?

In order to find an answer as accurate as possible to the question about the meaning of life, we first must realise what a human actually is. The question above does not only deal with *human* life, but the lives of all living organisms, even though it often is pre-understood that we, by asking the question above, actually mean, “What is the meaning of life of a human?”

A human is an *animal*, just like an elephant and a tiger and an animal is an *organism*, just like bacteria, plants and fungi. An organism is the common designation of something *alive*. Thus, in order to find out the meaning of life of a human we must first answer the question “What is the meaning of life of an organism?”

The meaning of life of a human can be answered using a three-branched diagram. One branch of it applies to all organisms, one only to animals and one only to humans.

The most fundamental meaning of life

All organisms share a common instinct: the instinct of *survival*. Bacteria, plants, fungi and animals – they are all struggling to survive. If an organism has problem surviving, it can normally not do anything else than struggle. A pre-requisite of merely being able to speculate about the meaning of life is, moreover, that you do *have* a life. Thus, the most fundamental meaning of life is to survive, i.e. to remain alive. Assuming that an organism does not have any problems surviving, it can perform additional tasks that can lead to other meanings of life.

The most fundamental meaning of life is to survive; this applies to all organisms.

The first meaning of life

An organism that does not have any problems surviving has another very strong instinct: the instinct to *reproduce*. In fact, this is the only real, biological, meaning of life. The major (biological) commission in life of a bacterium, plant, fungus and animal is to reproduce. The reproduction constitutes the basics of biological evolution and is essential to the survival of a species. It might, to some people, appear droll to mention such a biological aspect discussing the meaning of life of a human, but as the human *is* a biological organism, it is completely necessary if we want to find an accurate answer.

The first meaning of life is to reproduce. This applies to all organisms.

The second meaning of life

Having dealt with the two biological meanings of life, we can ask us, “is that all?” In fact, no one is hindering us to *define* additional meanings of life. Such additional meanings will hence not be biologically true; instead, their justification must lie in their significance.

Imagine a dog, confined in a cubic metre concrete cage. It is given oxygen and food, and one time in its life, it is allowed to reproduce. The life of the dog does indeed fulfil our recently established requirements, but is it an acceptable situation? As the dog probably suffers, the answer is most likely no. We realize that *well-being* must be an important aspect of life. This, however, does not apply to all organisms: bacteria, plants and fungi cannot suffer, as they lack consciousness; concerning these organisms, survival and reproduction suffices, but for all organisms with consciousness, i.e. most higher-standing animals, well-being is important.

To be spared from suffering, both physically and psychologically, and receiving stimuli from a good every-day life and perhaps from some occasional “pleasure activities”, contribute to the well-being of animals – and of the human being.

Reaching a state of well-being is not a biological meaning of life, but the fact that suffering is something most organisms with consciousness consider to be very bad and well-being something they consider to be very good, makes the search for well-being worth defining as a meaning of life. Hence, it will be our second meaning of life.

The second meaning of life is to achieve well-being; this applies to most higher-standing animals.

The third meaning of life

The third meaning of life of a human is to perform *positive development*. Positive development is a concept that contains every action that *improves* the well-being of humans and other higher-standing animals, e.g. scientific and social research and development.

Scientific development

Scientific research results in the acquiring of new, more correct, knowledge of the world. This may secondly improve the moral values of the society. For instance, we can imagine an individual who, being a racist, starts to study biology. Perhaps she will find out that there are no major differences between the human races concerning how they should be treated, which may rationalize her values and make her treat individuals of other races with more respect. In this scenario, scientific knowledge has improved the society and given more well-being.

Another problem in the modern society is the view of many people, that suffering of other animals than humans is less “bad” than human suffering. This incorrect view makes animal suffer more than necessary because of humans’ bad treatment of them. However, if we in the future find life on another planet (i.e. scientific knowledge), humans might realise how similar the other animals of the earth are to themselves and therefore begin to treat them better.

Scientific research might also result in applications that simplify, entertain and in other ways improve the daily life of humans. Today, for instance, there are modern houses to live in, which is valuable during the winter when the outdoor temperature in northern countries can fall below -20°C . Without the houses, humans in such countries would feel a great deal less well-being during the winters. Another great example is modern (medical) drugs, without which the well-being among ill and injured people would decrease, as they could not be healed or treated, respectively.

Both modern houses and drugs are result of scientific research, which in these examples has improved the life of humans. In these examples, there have been and are engineers and physicians, who have used and still are using their lives to apply the third meaning of life.

Research has also given us computers, which can be used for entertainment by means of playback of digital music and video and computer games, distribution of important information, simplified communication between humans and as source of knowledge. Moreover, modern vehicles, such as aircraft, cars and trains, by means of which the relative distances between humans and places decrease, are another example.

The scientific development is long-term. The technological foundation of the modern computer, for instance, was laid hundreds years ago. At that time, the scientists and engineers

were not able to enjoy the power of the (modern) computer. Today, however, we are grateful for their work. Moreover, the ceiling of the development has not been reached today, but the development should (and will) continue; in the future, the every-day life will have improved even further. One very important field of research is biochemistry and pharmacology. To be ill and injured in the future will probably be much less aching than today, both for the patients and their relatives.

Social development

Another form of positive development is the development of the society and its values. Let us imagine the society hundred years ago: if you did not believe in the views of the church, you could be arrested or tortured. If one happened to be a woman, one did not have very much influence at all, and if you happened to be dark-skinned, you could be used as a slave. Hence, there was more suffering in the society then. Today most of these problems are gone; the humans are more in a state of well-being. There has been a positive social development, which has improved the lives of humans. In these cases, many individuals have used their lives to apply the third meaning of life.

Furthermore, research and development in for instance science might very well directly give well-being to those performing it. Many scientists, for instance, do not work only to improve the society and to create useful products, but as they find the research exciting and pleasurable too.

On the earth today, as there are only humans and no other species able to perform positive development such as scientific research and society improvement, these activities – this meaning of life – can only be applied to humans.

The third meaning of life is to perform positive development. This applies only to humans.

Conclusion

The biological meaning of life is to survive and reproduce. To organisms with consciousness, well-being should be added as a meaning of life, and to humans positive development should be added. The positive development is meant to improve the well-being, i.e. the second meaning of life.

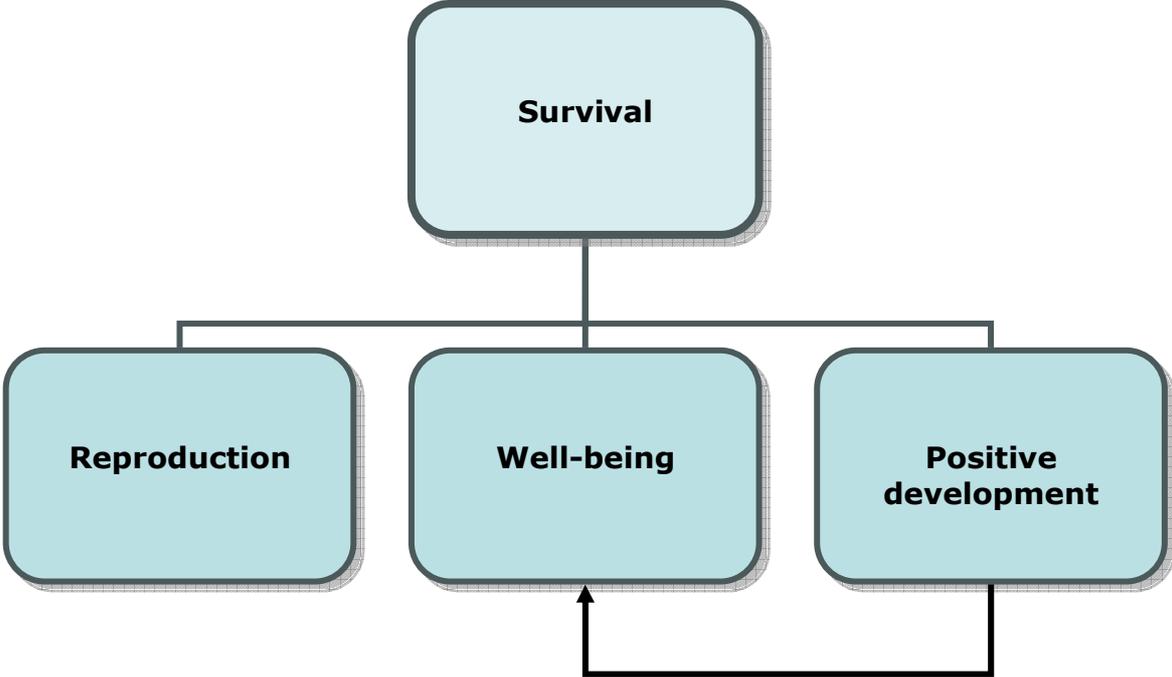


Figure 1 The meaning of life of a human. Survival is a pre-requisite to the other meanings of life, and positive development increases well-being.

What is important?

The meanings of life are probably the only meaningful in the universe. In general, things do not matter, simply. For instance, it does not matter whether a star ends its life as a white dwarf or a black hole. Nor does it really matter, whether a tree is five or ten metres high. Indeed, the consequences of the outturns in the two examples differ, but those only generate new questions, “what are the significance of the outturns?” Moreover, the four different outcomes might generate further different consequences, but we will never be able to determine a true *significance* of them.

When it comes to organisms with consciousness, however, we are able to determine that suffering *is* negative, whereas well-being *is* positive. Probably, the well-being of organisms with consciousness is the only thing in the universe that we really can consider important.

Thus, in a universe that lacks real significance and meaning, we are able to *create* meaning, by defining the well-being of conscious organisms as important. The third meaning of life must also be important, as it improves the second meaning of life.

We are easily able to define that well-being is important. There is, however, no simple way to define why survival is important (other than biologically), i.e. why it is better to be alive than dead, particularly as there does not imply any suffering to be dead. Nonetheless, we should define survival as an important meaning as well, and this due to several, quite important deductions:

- Only living people can perform positive development. Indeed, this requires that other individuals are alive (who can benefit from the development), and hence will this argument alone only be a vicious circle. The next argument is, however, always valid:
- Only living organisms can feel well-being. Indeed, a dead organism can never *miss* well-being, nor *experience* it.

Moreover, assuming that survival is important, reproduction (i.e. survival of the species) will be important too. Now, we have seen that all meanings of life are important.

Distribution of well-being

Now, we need to realise to which individuals the achievement of well-being is important. Spontaneously, many humans believe that the well-being is most important to themselves and their closest relatives. This view is represented in the following diagram, where black colour represents high priority of well-being, and white colour represents low or no priority.

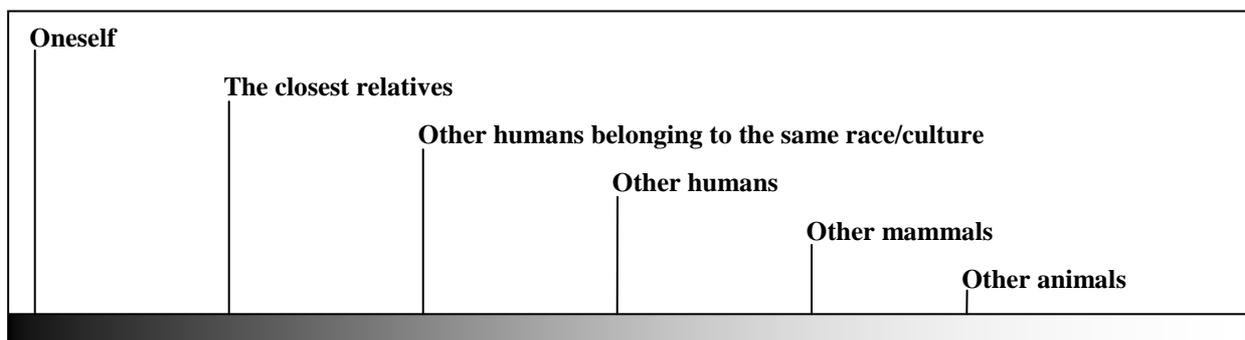


Figure 2 Egocentric priority of well-being.

This distribution comes from the humans' natural instincts of survival, and as such, it is neither strange nor unnatural. On the other hand, it is both morally incorrect and dangerous, as it may cause suffering, both to others and to oneself, because one belongs to the "others" set in the views of other people. Let us instead study the objective priority of well-being.

We previously have deduced that *suffering is bad* and that *well-being is good*. This means that *suffering is bad to all people able to feel suffering* and that *well-being is good to all people able to feel well-being*.

The severity of someone else's suffering hence equals the severity of oneself suffering. The objective priority of well-being is depicted below.

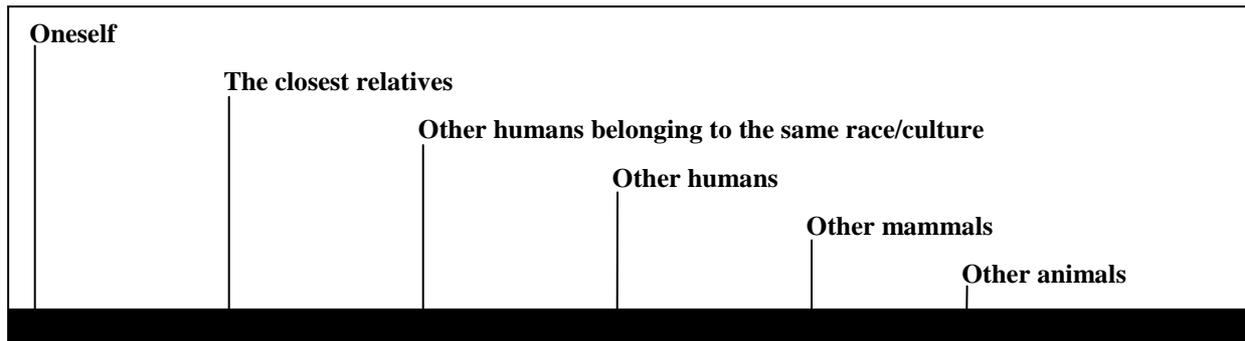


Figure 3 Objective priority of well-being.

The egocentric view might also rise from an error of thought. One might know that one has a consciousness, an "I" able to feel suffering and well-being. However, one is not able to feel the suffering and well-being of another, and hence one "forgets" or ignores the fact that the other human has her own, similar consciousness, an "I" of her own, and therefore is able to feel suffering and well-being.

Social consideration

The practice of giving the well-being of other people as high priority as the well-being of oneself, is henceforth called the practice of *social consideration*.

Let us provide a practical example:

If one is given a choice, whether to put one into a *minor discomfort* in order to save another from a *great discomfort* or not, one should put oneself into the minor discomfort, referring to social consideration. For oneself, the situation do get worse (one is put into a discomfort one otherwise would have been spared from), but as the other person is spared from an even greater discomfort, this decision will overall result in as little discomfort as possible. (As the well-being of another is as important as of oneself, logic implies that the best choice is the choice that, regardless of individuals, results in the highest well-being.) One could have been the one that was spared the great discomfort.

Another major positive effect of social consideration is that if everyone spares everyone from discomfort, then everyone will be spared from discomfort. Eventually, in a group in which all people practice social consideration, every one of the individuals will have suffered less discomfort than if the group had not practiced social consideration.

Conclusion

We have deduced the following conclusions:

- The goal of all activities of a human should be to *decrease the suffering* and *increase the well-being* of *all involved individuals*. Moreover, if some discomfort or suffering necessarily must occur, then the discomfort should be equally borne by all individuals, so that no one will be forced to bear too much and feel too bad. In addition, well-being should be equally distributed. Henceforth, the term “goal” will be reserved for this goal.
- Survival and reproduction should also be upheld.

Two ways of making decisions

On a fundamental basis, a human can make decisions in two ways. All decisions made by a human are made using some or both of these ways.

- Instinctive wish
- Logical consideration

Instinctive wish

This way of making decisions means that one follows one's instinctive emotions and impulses and hence makes what – at the moment – feels most attractive. This is the default way of making decisions of all animals of the earth, and thus the default method of the human too.

Logical consideration

One ignores one's emotions and impulses and bases one's decision upon a logical analysis. Logic is (here) the application of human language to deduce a conclusion from a number of premises (given facts). Assuming that all premises are correct, logic assures that the conclusion is correct as well.

A very clear example of a logical deduction:

P₁: All scientists work with science.

P₂: William is a scientist.

C: Therefore, William works with science.

Assuming that the both premises (P₁ and P₂) are true, we can be sure of the conclusion being correct as well. If the conclusion happens to be false, i.e. if William does not work with science, at least one of the premises must be false, i.e. not all scientists can work with science, or William cannot be a scientist. The logical deduction, however, is in all cases correct; the truth of the conclusion is assured only if all premises are true.

Concerning decision-making, logic may be used to confirm that the goal will follow the proposed action. Having to make a decision, one must determine all possible options and their assumed consequences, compare them with each other and then choose the option resulting in the consequence best applying to the goal.

The following is a practical example:

Choice: Should I put myself into a minor discomfort in order to spare another from a greater discomfort?

The following options are available:

Option 1: I do *not* put myself into a minor discomfort in order to spare another from a greater discomfort.

Option 2: I do put myself into a minor discomfort in order to spare another from a greater discomfort.

The two consequences are determined:

Consequence 1: I will not be put into any discomfort, and another will be put into a great discomfort.

Consequence 2: I will be put into a minor discomfort, and another will not be put into any discomfort.

As well-being is equally important to all people (premise), we can eliminate the parts in the consequences that are equivalent, “[someone] will not be put into any discomfort.” The residue will contain the real difference between the consequences.

Consequence 1: Another will be put into a great discomfort.

Consequence 2: I will be put into a minor discomfort.

As well-being is equally important to “another” and “I” (premise), we can eliminate these personal identifiers.

Consequence 1: [Someone] will be put into a great discomfort.

Consequence 2: [Someone] will be put into a minor discomfort.

Now, we are easily able to identify the difference between the two consequences. As discomfort is something we want as little of as possible, we should choose Choice 2.

Logical decision: I do put myself into a minor discomfort in order to spare another from a greater discomfort.

Conclusion

Having to make a decision, one should, by means of logical consideration, determine what option would result in the most favourable consequences, and then choose that option.

If one realises that an option overall will result in maximum well-being, then that options must be chosen; on the other hand, if one realises that the option overall will result in minimum well-being, then that option must not be chosen. “Overall” means that all of the predictable consequences have been considered. If, for instance, an activity generally results in major well-being, but an individual at the present time is too tired to perform the activity, then the tiredness should be considered as well. Thus, the logical consideration will state that the activity should not be performed.

The relevancy of logical consideration

The instinctive wish comes from the primitive nature of human, and is designed to help the individual (and her relatives) surviving. However, it is not specifically designed to follow our goal. Therefore, we are able to deduce the following conclusion:

What feels best at a particular moment might very well differ from what would be best to everyone, and what would be best to one in the future.

The logical consideration, on the other hand, is specifically designed to further the goal. An individual devoted to the use of logical consideration rather than instinctive living, would probably result in more well-being than one who is not. A comparison to dice tossing can be made: let us assume that our goal is to get the six upwards. To follow one's instincts would be to throw the dice, whereas to apply logical consideration would be to carefully put down the dice with the six upwards.

Conversely, most people prefer to follow their instincts, as they, similarly to all animals, are programmed to. If something at a moment feels very attractive to a human, it is very likely that the human will perform the attractive task, even though the task might be harmful to the person performing it and other people.

Practical examples

In the every-day life, many examples of the choice between impulse and logic exist. Often *self-discipline* is needed to be able to use logical consideration; one must avoid falling for temptations and be able to perform unattractive tasks.

Egocentrism – social consideration

Egocentrism opposed to social consideration has already been discussed.

Parties and ethanol – Temperance

Many people – especially youths – are commonly found at parties drinking vast amounts of ethanol (“alcohol”) and behaving inappropriately, hurting themselves and the surrounding property.

Vengeance and punishment – Temperance

Another common temptation is the practice of “punishing” someone who has committed a crime. Let us study this more closely, whether to punish a “criminal” or not.

Consequence 1: A crime has been committed and the “criminal” is about to suffer.

Consequence 2: A crime has been committed and the “criminal” is not about to suffer.

After having eliminated the equivalent parts, we obtain the following residue.

Consequence 1: The “criminal” is about to suffer

Consequence 2: The “criminal” is not about to suffer.

We realise that the option of applying a punishment results in less well-being, and should therefore be avoided. In order not to perform any “criminal acts” in the future, the “criminal”

might need treatment, though. Moreover, if a (mild) punishment is used in order to frighten other people from committing “crimes”, it might further the goal and might be acceptable, although other “crime” reducing measure (such as pedagogically proper moral teaching in schools or distribution of this very document) should be favoured. The only measure we really can forbid is the use of punishment only to make the “criminal” suffer. A criminal suffering is – of course – equally bad to another suffering.

The importance of having valid arguments

It is important always to have logically valid arguments to one's values, in order to be sure about the values being sound. Otherwise, values might very well further to discomfort rather than to our goal. Furthermore, it is important to deduce one's own values, and not to simply assimilate the values of others. Doing so, might lead to the considerable distribution of morally unsatisfying values. Today, it is a quite common habit – possible especially amongst young people – to assimilate the values of “famous” persons. This is bad, as nothing assure us that these “celebrities” have better values than the rest of the people. It might also be possible that the juridical law is unsound and does not lead to the goal, and that one then has to violate it. (Most often, though, this is not the case.)

One of the properties of the human is her behaviour in groups, which makes her assimilate behaviour and values from the group, rather than thinking herself. This might be very dangerous, and must be avoided. In a group, for instance, where everyone likes rock music – except for one, who likes classical music instead – the one with different opinion must be freely and unrestrictedly able to express her liking for classical music. Moreover, as humans often (literally) are “born” into their values, it is exceptionally important that every human regularly considers whether her values are sound or not.

Animal rights

One of the major problems on the earth today, caused by inadequate human behaviour, is the lack of animal rights

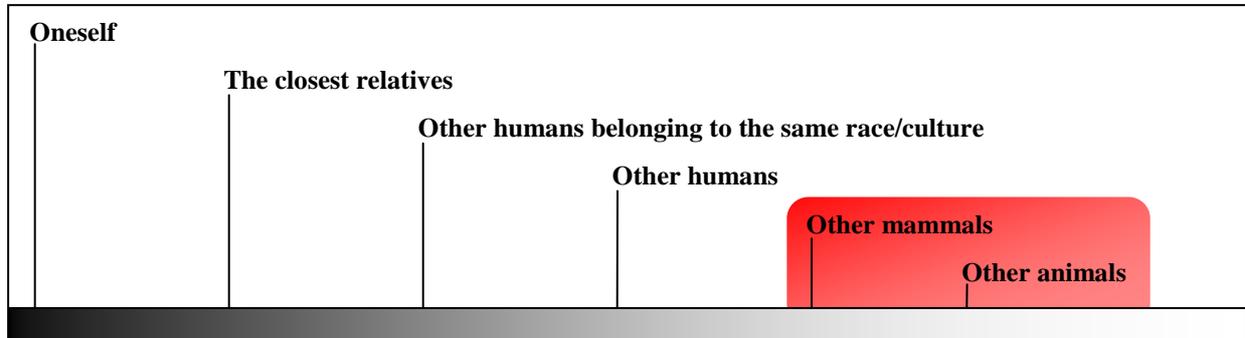


Figure 4 Egocentric priority of well-being with special emphasis on non-human animals

The problem

Many humans mean that suffering of (non-human) animals is less bad than suffering of humans. This implies inadequate handling of animals, which will feel less well-being.

We can quite easily realise that assault of a non-human animal is (about) equally bad as assault of a human.

The problem of an assault is the suffering.

A non-human animal suffers equally much during an assault as a human.

Therefore, it is equally problematic to assault a non-human animal, as it is to assault a human.

The above conclusion is valid if the premises are, so we must now investigate them more carefully. If the conclusion is false, then at least one of the premises must be false as well, i.e. the problem with assault is not the suffering, or an assaulted non-human animal does not suffer as much as an assaulted human. That the problem is the suffering, we can probably all agree to, and that a non-human animal is able to suffer as much as a human is furthermore very likely; remember that the human *is* an animal.

However, the second premise is not always true – not all animals can suffer. All species of animals have been developed from simple, one-celled organisms without consciousness, which therefore are unable to suffer. The consciousness – and the ability to suffer – has developed with time. Hence, small, primitive animals, such as protozoans have no consciousness at all, and other, quite primitive animals such as the simplest cnidarians and sponges are likely to lack consciousness as well.

All larger animals, however, such as reptiles, birds and especially all mammals have in general as high consciousness and ability to suffer as humans.

Cause

Below are some possible reasons behind the human's lack of understanding of animal rights.

- The narrow-mindedness mentioned in “Distribution of well-being” above; individuals that one does not have any emotional connection to can easily get a lower priority, and that one easily “forgets” that other animals actually do have consciousness and can feel suffering and well-being as well as oneself can.
- As the majority of people in the modern society regards that (non-human) animal well-being is less important than human well-being, this is the value that most people are borne into; the narrow-mindedness not to figure out that one has to/does not dare to question the values of one’s family/the majority.
- People’s inability to think at all. Possibly many people have not yet realised that the problem with assault is the suffering; instead, they believe that the problem is something else. For instance, some people believe that the reason one should not assault a human is that it is “obvious” (which is not an argument at all), or that the law says that one must not (not the real reason; one would not want to be assaulted even though it would be perfectly legal). If one only has such invalid arguments, one might not be able to deduce that assault of non-human animals is as problematic as assault of humans. If one, on the other hand realise, that the real reason that you should not assault a human is that the human then suffers, one is easily able to deduce that this applies to other animals as well.

Uncertainty

Concerning simpler animals and the question about how conscious they are, one must apply the principle of precaution; one must assume that the animal can suffer.

For instance, the author of this document does not know whether fish can feel pain or not, and would therefore strongly discourage people from using living fish as bate while fishing. Using living fish might imply terrible suffering, which would be much worse than if a human would have to eat something else than freshly caught fish that night.

Values and subjective views

It is important to distinguish between values and subjective views.

Values are fundamental rules describing what the goal (of the society) is and how it may be reached. A value is (ideally) either correct or incorrect. For instance, the value that “all men are equal” is correct, whereas the values that raping and bullfighting is acceptable are incorrect. Personal (subjective) view, on the contrary, are “facts” that are true to some people and false to others, and no view can be said to be “the best” view. For instance, some people like rock music, some like classical music and some do not like any music at all. In order to be correct, stating a view, one must therefore state the corresponding subject as well.

For instance, the following statement is false:

“Blue colour is nicer than red colour.”

However, the statement can be made true by specifying an appropriate subject:

“William thinks that blue colour is nicer than red colour.”

Collective subjects, such as “we” and “they,” can also be used if all individuals in the set of the subject agree.

In order for a statement to be a valid personal view, however, it must not affect other people (outside the subject) badly. For instance, the following statement is not a valid personal view:

“William likes bullfighting.”

Valid personal views, however, must be fully respected. Imagine a person *A*, for instance, who receives a large amount of well-being from travelling on ten vacations. Then imagine a person *B*, who receives the same amount of well-being from buying a computer-controlled home theatre system with surround speakers and a computer projector for the same amount of money. *A* and *B* might not “understand” the views of each other, but they have to respect them.

Conclusion

In this document, we have discussed the meaning of life and deduced what is important and thus what the goal of all human decisions and actions should be.

The human being is a very privileged species. Thanks to her ability to ignore her impulses, she is able to perform logical considerations that make sure that her actions imply her goals. Because of this, the human is alone responsible for herself and other species on this planet, and thus, it is exceedingly important that she knows what is right and how to choose her ways throughout life. Every human should be devoted to her *mission of living and acting morally satisfying*. This means that she always should do what makes all involved individuals receive the most well-being. Moreover, this is the best for herself as well, as she too belongs to the “all” set of people.

To live right, is to imply everyone’s well-being by means of rational thinking.

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