

# Reverence for Life: What Does It Mean?<sup>1</sup>

Kozi Asano

## Introduction

Here is a simple argument for animal rights. In so far as you can feel pain and pleasure, you would not want to be beaten or kicked or cut or injured or killed. Neither would you want to be confined. If so, you should not do any of those harmful actions to any other being, like you, that can feel pain and pleasure and would not want to be harmed in any of those ways. Specifically speaking, you have the rights to life, physical integrity and freedom. That is to say, you have the rights not to be killed, not to be injured and not to be deprived of freedom of action. Equally any other beings like you have the same rights to life, physical integrity and freedom.

As a matter of fact, that is the kind of reasoning that underlies the first Buddhist precept not to harm animals (不殺生). The Buddhist precept is based on the commonality between you and any other beings that can feel pain and pleasure. Contemporary animal rights theorists such as Peter Singer, Tom Regan and Gary Francione begin their arguments typically with the fact of human rights.<sup>2</sup> That is to say, they begin with the acknowledgement that every human being has basic human rights.

Certainly, there are various human rights. Some are just conventional; they are rights which some people happen to have by some kind of agreement. They are not basic human rights, however. Basic human rights are natural, not conventional.

Again, there are various basic human rights as you can see in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948. However, the most fundamental human rights among them are the rights to life, physical integrity and freedom of action. They are so fundamental that any political power

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<sup>2</sup> Singer is a two-level utilitarian. Thus, he is quite willing to acknowledge most of the ordinary moral rules, including basic human rights.

that does not respect them cannot claim legitimacy. They are also solid in the sense that they are agreed upon by everybody including those who are skeptical about other basic human rights. Anyway, it is these fundamental human rights that contemporary animal rights theorists focus upon.

Thus, everybody has the rights to life, physical integrity and freedom of action. So, it does not matter whether somebody is male or female, wealthy or poor, white or yellow, Arian or Jewish, free or unfree, straight or LGBT. Everyone has them, including babies, children, people with intellectual disabilities, and people with dementia. Now what makes everybody a holder of the fundamental human rights? It is neither language ability nor rationality. Some people cannot speak and others are not rational; yet they have the fundamental rights. Rather it is the ability to feel pain and pleasure, that is sentiency. If so, any beings that have the ability to feel pain and pleasure are equally entitled to the same fundamental rights. If you grant those rights to one species of sentient beings and not to another species, it is speciesism. Hence logical consistency requires fundamental human rights to be extended to other animals.

The above argument for animal rights are not only simple and straightforward, but also convincing. Then why do most people eat meat in Japan? We cannot eat meat without killing animals first.<sup>3</sup> Why do most people eat meat in China? I think that most people in Japan eat meat because they do not confront animal suffering. In other words, they do not take animal rights seriously. They just don't think but eat meat as a matter of custom. They grew up while being given meat for food. They have never examined whether or not it is morally right to eat meat.

By the way, this situation seems strange. Certainly, Japanese people consumed 4.1 million tons of meat in 2017, that is 32.7 kg per person. But 140 years ago Japan's consumption of beef in 1877 is estimated to be 3,319 tons, which is 0.092 kg per person. Since there are no statistics of meat for other animals in those days, apparently there was no meat industry dealing with pig, horse, goat, sheep or chicken. We can presume that Japan's consumption of pork, chicken etc. was negligible. So, most people did not eat meat in Japan in 1877, and only a small number of

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<sup>3</sup> There may be exceptions. For example, we can eat plant-based meat without killing animals; and perhaps we may be able to eat cultured meat although the first cells have to be taken from live animals.

people ate a small amount of beef. If you go back in history, Japanese Government officially prohibited meat eating from 675 till 1871. Although the decree does not seem to have been strict, it encouraged a culture against meat eating. So, we can presume that Japanese people ate very little meat before the modern age.

The above history tells us that the present habit of eating meat is not a permanent given but that it is culturally variable. Today's people eat meat because they have grown up in a meat-eating culture. If that is the case, it may be difficult to change people with rational arguments. People need to have developed an appropriate sensibility before they are willing to listen to arguments that would force them to change their life. Thus, we need to change our society and its culture. How? One thing we can do is education of children.

## **1. Education of Reverence for Life**

From this perspective, it is promising to find reverence for life much discussed and practiced at elementary and middle schools in Japan. For example, Japanese Ministry of Education includes the dignity (尊厳) of life as a value to be taught in the curriculum guidelines of moral education. In Japanese various expressions are used for this concept. Reverence (畏敬) for life is one among them. Other expressions are for example respect (尊重) for life, value (価値) of life and irreplaceable life. I use reverence for life as it is an expression which goes back to Albert Schweitzer. It also has a merit of carrying a religious connotation because Education Ministry's guidelines explain life as something beyond human power and something to be revered.

I am not particularly concerned with Schweitzer's thought. However, he provides us with a good starting point. According to Schweitzer, reverence for life is the moral principle that "good consists in maintaining, assisting and enhancing life, and to destroy, to harm or to hinder life is evil."<sup>4</sup> Thus life is the origin of values because it is valuable in itself. Now in Japanese Education Ministry's guidelines, children are expected to understand, first in their own case, that life is

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<sup>4</sup> Schweitzer, *Civilization and Ethics*, p. xviii.

wonderful and valuable. At the next stage, they are supposed to understand that others' life, especially other animals' and plants' life, is also wonderful and valuable. How would they understand it when most children are city-dwellers who have little contact with nature? One commonly employed method is to keep animals and grow plants at school. Through taking care of animals and plants, children experience the growth of animals and plants, empathizing with them. Thus they acquire such virtues as compassion and benevolence. What do you think of such an education? Such a virtue education is wonderful and so promising, isn't it?

There was a case of keeping an animal at school, which provoked a controversy some years ago. A class of children kept a pig at an elementary school north of Osaka (cf. Kuroda). Fourth-graders decided to keep a pig, got a small male pig and named him "P-chan." They took care of P-chan day in, day out and raised him for more than two years. Toward the graduation they discussed what to do with P-chan after they leave the school. Actually, it was the original plan to slaughter and eat P-chan, but apparently they hesitated. That is why they debated whether to slaughter P-chan or not. In the end they gave P-chan to a slaughter house after they graduated from the elementary school, but they did not eat him. What do you think of such an educational practice?

Is it good to raise a pig at school and kill it for food? Is it a good education? What does such an education teach children? The dominant view is that it is good; it can teach children both life and death. Through taking care of a pig, children acquire such virtues as compassion and benevolence, which make them tend to maintain, assist and enhance life. At the same time, they learn a lesson that we have to sacrifice life in order to live. By contrast, according to the opposite view, killing a pig is inconsistent with compassion and benevolence which children have cultivated in themselves. So, it is good to keep a pig but it is not good to kill it.

## **2. What Is Life?**

Both the dominant view and the opposite view agree that it is good to keep a pig at school. They differ in whether it is good to kill the pig. It is good to cultivate such virtues as compassion

and benevolence in children. Children will grow into kind and humane persons.

The opposite view is represented by the animal rights theory. According to this theory, just as we humans have rights to life, physical integrity and freedom of action, other animals have the same rights. So just as we have to be compassionate, benevolent, kind and humane to other people, we have to be so to other animals, too. If we can be compassionate, benevolent, kind and humane to other animals, *a fortiori* we can be so to other people. Hence it is wrong to kill P-chan. If we kill P-chan, children will get confused. They will not understand whether it is good to be compassionate and benevolent.

Then what is the logic of the dominant view? What can children learn from killing P-chan? They can learn a lesson that we have to sacrifice life in order to live. Certainly, compassion and benevolence are one aspect of life, but another aspect of life is that life can live only by sacrificing other life. So, we have to respect not only other life but also our own life. Thus, we are justified in killing P-chan in order to respect our own life. How do compassion and benevolence work when we kill P-chan? Needless to say, other life is valuable; yet it has to be sacrificed for our own life. Compassion and benevolence tend to generate a sense of regret in ourselves and a sense of gratitude to other life that has to be sacrificed for our own life. That is a moral education which the dominant view envisions.

The distinctive feature of the dominant view is that it does not make a distinction between animals and plants. Every form of life is valuable. Nevertheless we have to sacrifice life in order to live. So, it does not matter whether the sacrificed life is animal or plant.

Killing P-chan contradicts compassion and benevolence. When the dominant view justifies killing P-chan, it seems to endorse the law of the jungle. For we are justified in killing other animals in order to maintain, assist and enhance our own life. Probably other animals follow the law of the jungle. Every life has to sacrifice other life in order to maintain, assist and enhance its own life. So, we do the same.

As I have already stated, the dominant view does not distinguish animals and plants. According to this view, life means life in general. That is why this view can boldly claim that life

has to sacrifice other life in order to live. Even plants compete with other plants for sunlight.

However, life in a narrow sense can mean emotional life or sentient life. For emotional or sentient life has a distinctive significance from a moral point of view. For example, we cut our hair and nails. When we do so, we do not hesitate even though our hair and nails are alive. The reason is that they do not feel anything. Of course sometimes we clumsily injure our scalp and fingers while cutting our hair and nails. Then we feel pain but hair and nails don't. Again, when people become brain dead, we can use their organs for transplant and consequently kill them. In other words, we no longer regard them as holders of fundamental human rights. Why? Because they feel nothing and they have no consciousness. It is indicated by the flatness of their brain waves.

I am not saying that we can do anything to brain dead people. Even a corpse demands a certain respect. We have to treat corpses respectfully. Plants, too, require a respectful treatment. We have to treat plants respectfully if we are to pay due respect to their value. However, that is quite different from the kind of moral consideration demanded of us by animals. Animals can feel pain and suffer. That is how they are different from plants. Thus they have a morally considerable life. That is why life means animals in a morally important sense.

### **3. Reverence for Life in the Moral Sense**

In the above, we saw that life can have two meanings. First, it means life in general. We can call this "cosmic meaning" because life in this sense has a value from a cosmic point of view. The value of life in general requires a certain frame of mind (reverence for life), but does not really restrict our behavior.<sup>5</sup> Second, life means emotional or sentient life. We can call this "moral meaning" because this form of life has a moral value, which requires certain actions and inactions of us.

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<sup>5</sup> Actually, there are two ways of thinking when we do not distinguish animals from plants. One way is the dominant view which we discuss here. The other way is to take plant life as seriously as animal life. This second way, going beyond animal rights, requires us to respect plant life as far as possible. Jainism and fruitarianism are examples of the second way.

Now which meaning should we take for our education of reverence for life? We should take the moral meaning. Why? When life is understood in its cosmic sense, reverence for life does not tell us anything on what we should do and what we should not do. It does not give us any moral guidance. Instead it allows any egregious acts in so far as we do such acts in an appropriate manner with an appropriate frame of mind.

Let me give you just one example. When we go to medical schools in Japan, we usually find a memorial for the animals sacrificed for medical experiments. In the memorials we typically find the following statements:

1. We solace and thank sacrificed animals.
2. Animals had to be sacrificed for the sake of medical advance and humanity.
3. We should not waste their valuable life but rather make the best use of their sacrifice.
4. Sometimes a sense of guilt is also expressed.

Thus, reverence for life in the cosmic sense does not prevent people from doing any egregious experiments on animals. Perhaps reverence for life in this sense may be fine. It might be better than nothing; but it does not make us morally right.

We should teach children reverence for life in its moral sense. Then children will develop a sensibility which make them tend not to harm animals.<sup>6</sup> When they grow up and face rational arguments that require them to change their eating habit, they will be ready to accept the arguments.

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<sup>6</sup> This is the end of keeping an animal at school. As I have already stated, the animal rights theory claims that animals have freedom of action. Hence it follows that it is wrong to keep an animal. That is the direct theoretical consequence of the animal rights theory. Then how can we keep an animal? Is there any morally just way to keep an animal? One way to keep an animal morally is to keep it without confinement. However, this way would not be practical in cities. So, the second best way is to guarantee an animal as much space as possible, not to mention five freedoms of animal welfare (freedom from hunger and thirst, freedom from discomfort, freedom from pain, injury or disease, freedom to express normal behavior, and freedom from fear and distress). If we guarantee an animal a large space as well as five freedoms, then perhaps pet-keeping may be justified. There seems to be a room of justifiability for pet-keeping. At any rate, since pet-keeping usually limits an animal's freedom of action, it is a concession made for the sake of animal rights movement. For, without direct and close contact with animals, it is difficult for children to feel that other animals are "just like us."

Here we can go back to the controversy on the educational practice of keeping a pig. Is it a good practice? The dominant view gave a positive answer, but according to the opposite view the school should not have killed P-chan. If a school keeps a pig, it should take care of it throughout its life. As a matter of fact, an animal rights movement is growing today partly because we do not kill animals in everyday life.

An aspect of the dominant view is a belief that life can live only by sacrificing other life. Stated thus simply, this belief may sound true. But it does not follow that we have to kill animals in order to live. The fact is that we do not need to eat animals in order to live a decent, prosperous life. That is, we can be vegetarians or vegans. Perhaps in the past, where there was not enough plant food available, people had to eat animals. In such a situation, eating meat was necessary. But today we have enough plant food at least in Japan and China. So, eating meat is frivolous. It only shows the lack of compassion. Reverence for life in the moral sense tells us not to harm animals, consequently not to kill and eat animals.

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