Abstract: Legitimate differences in the ways we treat animals and humans must be based on the differences between them. Philosophers have traditionally cited a variety of factors – rationality, sentience, having interests – as morally significant. In this lecture I discuss what the morally important similarities and differences between human beings and animals are. Along the way, I challenge the claim that human beings are more important than, or superior to, the other animals, and I advance a theory about why anything matters at all.

Terminology: “creature” = human being or animal; “animal” usually = non-human animal

I. Are People More Important than the Other Animals?

A common view: we are obligated to treat the other animals “humanely” but this obligation gives way to any important human interest (finding cures for diseases, finding protein for a growing human population, testing medicines and products). Why? Because animals are “less important” than people.

Problem: this claim makes no sense.

Then why are we tempted to believe it?

2 ways human/animal difference might matter:
1. Humans have some unique property that gives us “moral standing” and the other animals don’t - but then we’d have no duties to them at all.
2. Differences matter to the detail of our duties.
   Example: if what matters to an animal is only the quality of her life but not its continuance, it might be permissible to kill animals humanely for food.
Confusion of these two thoughts: since we may kill animals, they have “less” moral standing than humans.

Why that’s confused (Singer’s Point): if you are giving to the human and to the animal what matters to each of them, you are treating them equally.

A 3rd way human/animal differences might matter: legitimate partiality. In certain circumstances, our own kind might be more important to us, just as our own friends and families are more important to us, and it might be permissible for us to act on that thought. Most philosophers think exercising such partiality is compatible with regarding all humans as equally important absolutely.

Why the claim that people are more important than animals makes no sense:

A claim about importance: Everything that is important must be important to some creature.

So to whom are humans more important? If to ourselves, that doesn’t show that we are more important absolutely.
Two ways to understand the implications of the claim about importance:

1. All importance is RELATIVE. Things are important to you or to me but nothing is important absolutely.

2. All importance is TETHERED. What is important to some creature ceases to be important when the connection between it and the creature to whom it is important is severed.

3. Something of tethered importance could still be important ABSOLUTELY if it were important to every creature to whom things can be important (absolute = relative to everybody). In fact, that’s all we can mean when we say something is important absolutely.

Tethered Importance vs. Coetzee’s Imaginary Philosopher

Coetzee’s Imaginary Philosopher: “It is licit to kill animals because their lives are not as important to them as ours are to us.” (The Lives of Animals, p. 64)

1. Is there some metric by which we could compare how important the lives of animals are to them and to how important the lives of humans are to us?
   - Problems: animals cling to life in circumstances in which people would give up; people commit suicide; people die for causes.
   - Reply: That last shows the way we are more important to ourselves: our lives are fraught with meaning and value.

2. The sense that our lives are more important to us may be born of lack of empathy.

   “We are all of us born in moral stupidity, taking the world as an udder to feed our supreme selves: Dorothea had early begun to emerge from that stupidity, but yet it had been easier to her to imagine how she would devote herself to Mr. Casaubon, and become wise and strong in his strength and wisdom, than to conceive with that distinctness which is no longer reflection but feeling – an idea wrought back to the directness of sense, like the solidity of objects – that he had an equivalent center of self, whence the lights and shadows must always fall with a certain difference.”
   George Eliot, Middlemarch

3. Tethering: Even if people are more important to themselves or important to themselves in a different way than animals, this wouldn’t make us more important absolutely.

   Point: not “animals are just as important as people” but rather “there is no place to stand from which you can make this comparison.”

II. What is an Animal? Or: Why Does Anything Matter?

Why these are the same question:
If importance is tethered, things matter because there are entities to whom they matter. These are the entities for whom things can be good or bad, in the sense that matters morally. These entities are (almost by definition) animals.
Two Senses of Good and Good-For

1. Evaluative or Functional: In this sense anything can be evaluated as good or bad, but usually it applies things that have some role or function. A thing is good if it has the properties that enable it to serve its function well, and the conditions and activities that promote those properties in it or enable it to maintain them are good-for it in the functional sense.

2. Final: worth having, realizing, bringing about for its own sake; suitable as an end of action.

Question: Why do we use the word “good” in both cases?
Common answer: Both uses are evaluative: in the case of final goods, we are evaluating lives and ends
Question: how can we evaluate lives and ends when they don’t have a function?

A clue: to be finally good, something must be good from the point of view of the one who has it.

Organism: something whose function is to maintain its own “form” (Aristotle), i.e. survive and reproduce, that is, something whose function is to take care of its own functional goodness.

Animal: something whose function is to maintain its own form through action: that is, by representing the things that are good or bad for her in the functional sense as attractive or aversive, and therefore by experiencing what is good for her in the functional sense as finally good, and what is bad for her in the functional sense as finally bad: that is, by enjoying and suffering from her own existence.

So what is the standard of evaluation we use when judge something finally good? Basically, it is empathy: we are looking a creature’s functional good, and the things that contribute to it, as the creature herself does, and so as a final end.

Some Caveats:

1. The claim is not that animals consciously intend their own good. The claim is that that’s how they work.

2. Animals often don’t work very well, since they evolve in one set of conditions and may cease to function well when those conditions change.

3. When applying this account of the final good to people, we have to remember that given the way we work, what counts as well-functioning for us is complicated.

Conclusion: things matter, that is, there is such a thing as final good, because there are animals.
III. Human Beings and Personhood

Two Forms of Cognition

1. Instinctive: Animals perceive the world “teleologically” – as a world of things to-be-sought, to-be-avoided, to-be-chased, to-be-investigated, to-be-eaten, to-be-cared-for, to-be-mated with. Their attitudes are a lens through which they see the world rather than part of the world they see.

Caveats:
1. Instinctive does not mean “automatic.“
2. Instinct is compatible with intelligence, the ability to expand your repertoire of “teleological” responses through learning and to solve problems by taking thought. 
   Intellige = Rational.

2. Rational: Rational animals (People) are (can be) self-conscious about the potential grounds of our beliefs and actions, and can evaluate them, determining whether they are good or bad reasons for believing or acting, and adjusting our beliefs and conduct accordingly. We are aware of the attitudes that would motivate us to act (if we were not so aware) and decide whether to act on them or not.

Two differences this makes:

1. When we endorse our positive attitudes towards certain objects, deciding they count as good reasons, we value those objects.

2. When we become aware that we can evaluate our own motives and act accordingly, we become aware that our actions are up to us: we are normatively self-governing beings, or persons.

Two implications of personhood:

1. Normative self-conception: when we become aware that we can evaluate our motives and actions, and that our actions are up to us, we begin to evaluate ourselves.

2. We become moral animals, and acquire obligations.

Why Personhood/normative self-government/morality is not a form of human superiority:

1. “Moral” here doesn’t mean morally good: it means being capable of being either good or bad.

2. One thing is superior to another when the same standards apply to them both and the first meets those standards better than the second. But moral standards do not apply to the other animals.

3. Moral life and animal life are just different forms of life. One is not superior to the other.