

Giving counterexamples

If (a) treating being B as a citizen will be hugely beneficial to nation N, and (b) being B has written a 20 page essay explaining why they should be made a citizen, and (c) 90% of the citizens of nation N have voted to make B a citizen, then it is morally unjust for N to not grant B the legal rights of a citizen.

If any of (a), (b), or (c) is false, then it is morally just for N to not grant B the legal rights of a citizen.

Some good rules of thumb for finding counterexamples:

1. **Don't forget that you have two conditionals!** (most of you, at least)
2. Pick the conditional most open to counterexample:
 - a. This is typically the more controversial conditional
 - b. Or the most expansive conditional (the antecedent applies to more situations – the one with “or”)
3. Consider examples right near the borderline between the conditionals.
 - a. These are cases that just barely fit the antecedent of the conditional the counterexample is relevant to.
 - i. When the antecedent says “If (a) *or* (b) *or* (c), then...” look at cases where only one of these conditions is met, and the others are not.
 - b. Don't be afraid to add a lot of details that make your view look bad, even if they are very unlikely to occur. You only need to show that there is a *single* counterexample, even if it is a very rare type of case.
 - i. If the antecedent has a lot of “or” conditions, make just one of them met, and just barely, while the others are maximally *unmet*.
 - c. Alternately: think of features that are not mentioned at all in the antecedent. Are there situations in which one of these might seem really important?

Responding to counterexamples

Thesis: if person A is competent and benefits from animal labor which harms the animal, and to which the animal does not give consent, then A's actions are morally wrong.

Part 2

Monty is a single father of a young child. The child needs expensive medical treatment, which insurance does not cover and which Monty cannot pay for with his current job. Monty knows of no legal options for getting this money – his family and friends do not have enough money to pay for the treatment (even if they pool their resources), his credit cards do not have a high enough limit to cover the treatment, and no one will loan him the money. If his child does not receive this treatment, the child will experience horrible pain for months and then die. Monty's boss offers Monty a lot of money if Monty will help the boss run a one-time dog fighting ring; his boss will not give him the money unless Monty helps her. This dog fighting ring uses dogs that are not normally inclined to fight – beagles, schnauzers, and pugs. The animals are given drugs to make them violent. The fights harm the dogs, who are not compensated. The dogs do not consent, since they only fight because they are on drugs.

It is morally permissible for Monty to help his boss in this case, and to benefit from the animal's labor. This is because it is permissible for parents to do things that are ordinarily wrong in order to save their children's lives. There is a limit to this: it is wrong to murder other humans to save one's child. But the lives of dogs are less valuable than those of a human, and a good parent especially should value their own child's life more than that of an animal (e.g. if one has to choose to pay for medicine for one's child or one's pet, one should buy the medicine for the child). So it is permissible for Monty to choose to help his boss here, even though his choice is competent.

Part 3 (version a)

It is clear that the best option available to Monty is to help his boss run the dog fighting ring, and save his child's life. But the best option is not always the permissible one, and in this case the best option is in fact wrong. This is because it is wrong to implicate other people in harmful actions they would not consent to, even if this is to help those people. For example, imagine that A goes into debt to buy B a birthday present, and B would be strongly opposed to A's going into debt for this reason. This is immoral, because it implicates B in the harm to A, and B does not want to be implicated in this way. [more argument needed]

In Monty's case, Monty is basically being forced into running a dog fighting, which is a harmful and degrading experience. Monty's child would not want Monty to experience this degradation. So Monty is implicating the child in these harms against the child's will. Further, Monty's child is being implicated in the harms to the dogs against the child's will. So, Monty is wronging the child for the child's benefit; this is wrong even if it is best for the child...

Question: Could we add details to the counterexample in Part 2 so that this response no longer works?

Part 3 (version b)

I agree that what Monty does here is permissible. However, Monty cannot be competent in this situation, and so this case is not relevant to my thesis. Psychological research of parents whose children are close to death shows that these parents lose certain cognitive capacities, rendering them incompetent to make serious choices ... [I don't actually know this is true, and if you were to claim something like this in your paper, you'd need scientific evidence to back it up]

Part 3 (version c)

I share the feeling that Monty's behavior is permissible, but we should not trust this reaction to this example. It is based on morally unimportant aspects of the case. To see why, imagine a somewhat different case. In this version, there is a child with the exact same condition, who is a stranger to Monty and lives in a different country. Monty has never met this child, but hears about their condition. The child's family cannot afford medical treatment for the child. Monty is moved by the child's plight, so he approaches his boss and tells her that he will help her with her dog fighting ring, and then sends that money to save the child. The people I've talked to tend to see this as wrong, even if they see Monty's behavior as permissible in the original example. But sick children are sick children, no matter who or where they are. If it is morally permissible to help with dog fighting to help *nearby* sick children, then it should be permissible to do so to help sick children that are far away [more argument would be needed]. But the identify and location of the children makes a big difference to our reactions to this case. This means that our reactions are affected by morally irrelevant features of the case, and we should not trust them. So this is not a good counterexample to my thesis.

Question: Is this response potentially overlooking an important difference between the example in Part 2 and the example it discusses?

Writing style

My thesis is that only human beings have a right to life.

There is a great deal of evidence that directly supports this thesis: most people believe that it is true and act accordingly. People are legally allowed to euthanize their pets or livestock without any good reason, and it is not considered murder to hunt or kill animals that don't belong to anyone. These are only laws, but most people seem comfortable with these laws, suggesting that they reflect common-sense morality. About 80% of the U.S. population approves of hunting.¹ Only about 3% of Americans are vegetarians, even though almost no one in America needs to eat meat in order to survive.² If we thought animals did have a right to life, we wouldn't think it was morally permissible to hunt or eat them, except in very dire situations (e.g. to save one's life), and we would expect fewer people to do so or to approve of doing so. One might argue that we do think that *some* animals have rights to life, just not the ones we eat. But that is not plausible. Among the most widely killed and eaten animals are pigs.³ Pigs, however, demonstrate cognitive, emotional, and social capacities similar to those of primates (including chimpanzees), dogs, or pre-linguistic human children. That is, they are among the more cognitively, socially, and emotionally advanced non-human animals. But the vast majority of humans clearly do not think pigs have a right to life. If pigs do not have a right to life, then there are no plausible non-humans animals that do.

While my thesis is directly supported by a lot of evidence, there are a number of objections to it. If none of these are strong objections, though, we should conclude that my thesis is correct.

First objection: there is something morally reprehensible about people who kill puppies for fun. If such a person got incredible amounts of pleasure out of this, this would only make the killing more awful, not less. If no animals had a right to life, then the killing of puppies would be permissible if the killing brought enough pleasure into the world. Since killing puppies for fun is wrong even if it brings a great amount of pleasure into the world, and probably more wrong if it brings *more* pleasure, at least some animals must have a right to life (according to this objection).

I agree that there is something morally reprehensible about people who kill puppies for fun. But this doesn't show that puppies have a right to life. The reason why it is morally reprehensible is that when we see puppies feel pain or die, it triggers the same parts of our brain that react when humans feel pain [citation omitted]. If a person enjoys killing puppies, they must lack this part of the brain. This makes them more dangerous to humans, who really do have a right to life. And research on serial killers shows that they typically start by harming pets [citation omitted]. So, even if there is something morally reprehensible about people who kill puppies for fun, this doesn't show that animals have a right to life – killing animals for fun is reprehensible because *humans* have a right to life.⁴

[other objections discussed and responded to]

¹ <http://www.rmef.org/NewsandMedia/PressRoom/NewsReleases/NationalSurveyAllTimeHigh.aspx>

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vegetarianism_by_country

³ <http://www.animaletics.org.uk/i-ch7-3-pigs.html>

⁴ My thanks to Immanuel Kant for suggesting this response to this objection. (Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*)