

VICTIMS AS THE CENTRAL FOCUS OF ETHICS: THE PRIORITY OF AMELIORATING SUFFERING OVER MAXIMIZING HAPPINESS

Floris van den Berg

The key focus in ethics should be on victims. Victims are those that suffer from unnecessary and preventable pain and misery. Non-human animals can also suffer and should therefore be included in the moral circle. Ethical living is striving to avoid harm to others and striving to help alleviate or prevent suffering. Being good isn't easy.

From the ethical point of view, no symmetry between suffering and happiness, or between pain and pleasure. [...] human suffering makes a direct moral appeal for help, while there is no similar call to increase the happiness of a person¹ who is doing well anyway.

Karl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*²

There is an ocean of unnecessary and avoidable suffering and misery in the world. It is hard to accept, but suffering is endemic for the existence of sentient beings: 'nature is red in tooth and claw'. However, the *amount* of unnecessary suffering humans cause is a matter of choice. The focus of moral philosophers and politicians should be to strive to reduce suffering and thus to focus first and foremost on victims of unnecessary suffering inflicted by humans.

Shouldn't the purpose of moral philosophy be to make the world a better place, that is: a world with less suffering and more happiness? If that is the case, then we should strive to optimize the position of victims (the so-called maxi-min strategy). The amelioration and avoidance of suffering has priority

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over the stimulation of happiness: first, no harm; then striving for pleasure and happiness. Focusing on misery, suffering and victims places a heavy moral burden on how to live an ethical life and the goal of politics.

Philosophers can play a role in analysing the concept of victimship. What is a victim? And what is the criterion for victimship? Popper speaks about 'human suffering', but as Peter Singer and others have pointed out, it seems arbitrary to limit the moral consideration to humans only. Suffering is suffering – the 'what' that is suffering is irrelevant. Here we expand the moral circle from anthropocentrism (Popper) to sentientism (Singer/Ryder). Most humans and most societies have blind spots for categories of victims, e.g. homosexuals, infidels, women, apostates, dissidents, believers of a different faith, future generations, people of different colour, ethnic minorities, transsexuals, freethinkers, the poor, non-human animals, circumcised infants for no medical necessity, etc. Moral progress is about expanding the moral circle, both in theory (sentientism) and in practice (e.g. by veganism). We should never take sides with the oppressors and their attempts to justify their behaviour, but always take the side of the individual victim. Individual victims are the central focus of ethics: we should avoid causing unnecessary suffering by our lifestyle, and help victims as much as we can.

There are two versions of prevention of suffering: do no harm, and help as you can. First, *do no harm*, e.g. in the sense of choosing a vegan dinner over dinner with animals who have suffered and been killed for unnecessary reasons. The main reason why many people eat animal corpses and animal products is because they like the taste of meat, not because humans would starve on a plant-based diet. Humans can eat a healthy diet without animal products, so the suffering of victims (the animals) could easily have been prevented. This kind of prevention is the liberal no harm principle: *first, do no harm*. The second version of help as you can, promoted by e.g. Singer³ and Unger,⁴ is that there is a *moral obligation to help* if you can

help when your sacrifice is significantly less than the suffering of the victim. Not helping if you could do so is a moral flaw. So, if you can donate money, which will help victims, you are under a moral obligation to do so. Singer and Unger make ethical living a lot harder than the common idea of ethical living.

A victim is someone you *really* wouldn't want to change places with. Personally, I don't want to change places with a professional soccer player, the waiter, the barista, or the gardener, but all these positions are, in most contemporary western societies, morally interchangeable positions. None of these positions are those of victims. Compare these with, for example: a woman in Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Somalia; a homosexual in Saudi Arabia, Iran, Russia, Nigeria; being poor in India, China, Ethiopia, Eritrea; a free-thinker ('infidel'), apostate or atheist in Russia, North Korea, Pakistan, or Somalia. Pause a moment to reflect on what it means to be a victim: can you imagine yourself to be a woman in (e.g.) Saudi Arabia? Or, a homosexual in Iran?

Cultures, traditions and societies are experiments in living. History tells the story of those experiments, and in most cases, it is a huge moral failure. Moral progress can be defined when society/tradition/culture moves forward towards fewer victims: less suffering and more happiness. Decreasing victimship is the result of expanding the moral circle. It might be hard to give an overall moral evaluation of societies/traditions/cultures, but in many cases, it is fairly obvious. The *Amnesty International Yearbook* lists violations of human rights for nations of the world: the smaller the lemma, the better this nation is. In many, if not most, societies/cultures/nations/traditions all through history homosexuals have been victimized. Same-sex marriage plus the social acceptance of homosexuality is a recent phenomenon in some western societies. The Netherlands was the first country in the world to legalize same-sex marriage in 2001 and in which homosexuality is culturally widely accepted. Homosexuals are – by and large – not

victims in the Netherlands. In Iran homosexuals are sentenced to death.

Some societies/nations/traditions/cultures/religions/ideologies make more victims than others. We should create a society in which there are no victims, in which there is no preventable unnecessary suffering. The ability to notice and care for victims depends on our empathy. Society can foster empathy or it can discourage empathy. My hope and dream is that education will focus attention to stimulate empathy among students, using literature, history and anthropology. For example, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) by Harriet Beecher Stowe raised (and still does) empathy for what it means to live the life of a slave. Perhaps Jonathan Safran Foer's *Eating Animals* (2009) and J. M. Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals* (1999) could play the same role in this liberation movement of expanding the moral circle based on sentientism.

The world can be a much better place. We, as individuals and groups, should focus on preventing victimship and, if we can't prevent it, we should ameliorate the condition of victims. First, we should not make victims ourselves (therefore, for example, veganism is a moral imperative) and, second, we should individually and collectively strive to ameliorate suffering wherever we can. The state and international (political) organizations, like the EU and the UN, should concern themselves with the task of progressively formulating and implementing policies designed to deal with the social problems which actually confront it, with the goal of eliminating preventable misery and suffering to the highest possible degree. Documents like the UDHR (1948), the UN Sustainable Development Goals (2016) and the Earth Charter (2000) are examples of the moral progress of the expanding moral circle; the problem, however, is implementation. Popper argues for 'the principle that the fight against avoidable misery should be a recognized aim of public policy, while the increase of happiness should be left, in the main, to private initiative'. You

wouldn't want to be a victim, would you? And that is the reason we should focus on victims.

Dr Floris van den Berg is Assistant Professor in Environmental Philosophy at Utrecht University. florisvanbergen@dds.nl

¹ These were the times before awareness of the male gender bias. Popper wrote 'man'.

² Karl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1952), vol. I, ch. 5, n. 6.

³ Peter Singer, *The Life You Can Save: How to do your part to end world poverty* (2010); *The Most Good You Can Do How effective altruism is changing ideas about ethical living* (2016).

⁴ Peter Unger, *Living High and Letting Die. Our Illusion of Innocence* (1996).