



Low Utility Curve

Over at the Reality-Based Community, my co-blogger [James Wimberley rightfully takes to task a right-wing economist named Karl Smith](#) for what Wimberley calls the dumbest blog post of 2011. Smith essentially seems to argue that it's okay to cause hundreds of species to become extinct because it will increase aggregate wealth in the short run.

In doing so, James makes a point so gobsmackingly obvious that it is somewhat embarrassing that I had never thought of it before. Most economists, James observes, are utilitarians:

Now as Bentham observed, animals suffer too. The basic physiology of [pain](#) and [pleasure](#) is found throughout the animal kingdom in anything that has a nervous system....

For now, we'll forget about fish and lobsters. Polar bears, lemurs, dogs and cats certainly feel pain and pleasure, and Descartes was just wrong to deny it. For a utilitarian the implication is inescapable: we should avoid causing higher animals unnecessary pain.

The dramatic reduction in [Arctic summer ice](#) and its possible elimination is putting the polar bear population under severe stress. The distances between ice floes are becoming too far to swim. Many polar bears are dying of starvation, and their reproduction is problematic – bear cubs need two years' training by their mothers to have a chance of fending for themselves. This stress, caused by human AGW, imposes net suffering on the bear population compared to the steady state.

....Overall we are looking at an Arctic world with fewer and more miserable bears and seals. That's a welfare loss. On any plausible accounting, if policymakers had to choose between the lives of the last 1500 polar bears and those of another retired blogger or assistant professor of right-wing economics, Smith and I should not expect to make the cut.

One thing about the debates between those who favor cost-benefit analysis and those who don't concerns the value of biodiversity. Yes, yes, one could put it in dollar terms, but at the end of the day, the CBW skeptics say, in best faux-Rawlsian terms, that there are just some

things that you can't put on a utilitarian calculus.

But if we are serious about our utilitarianism, you have to put animal welfare on a utilitarian calculus because animals feel pleasure and pain.

There are two obvious responses to this, neither of them particularly persuasive from a utilitarian standpoint:

1) *Human beings are different and better than other animals, even higher ones.* If you accept this, you are no longer a real utilitarian: you are saying that some pleasures are better than others. That's a no-no, according to Dr. Bentham (via JS Mill): "[push-pin is as good as poetry](#)." You might say that human beings have rights that animals don't, and I agree with you, but then you can't use a purely utilitarian calculus to judge things, and you should stop talking about efficiency as if it's the polestar of your policy thought.

2) *We can't really measure "utils," so we use aggregate wealth maximization as a proxy.* This is Richard Posner's argument, and it has holes you could drive a truck through, but when we are talking about extinctions of whole species, then that proxy looks even worse than it does now. It's one thing to use an approximation; it's another to use a measure that ignores vast swathes of what it is trying to measure on its own terms. The celebrated "[drunk under the lamppost](#)" has his day job in the University of Chicago economics department.

[Peter Singer recognized this decades ago](#), but the title of his book — *Animal Liberation* — might have obscured more than it revealed. Singer wasn't trying to *liberate* animals: he was just trying to have their utility curves included in the overall calculus. I don't think that one can do that, but if one is being serious about her utilitarianism, one has to try — as Singer does and as virtually every economist does not.

So in the end, maybe we shouldn't be talking about "animal rights" at all: we should instead be talking about "animal utilities". And if economists continue to resist inclusion of animal utilities, then that's one more nail in the coffin of efficiency as the principal value criterion.