It may seem odd to have another chapter after the conclusions. The reason for it is that the conclusions were about methods for assessing suffering, and these, as we saw in Chapter 1, are only part of the total picture of animal welfare. Having focused for most of the book on such methods, we will now move the camera backwards, as it were, and try to take a wider view. Controversies rage. Governments are under pressure to change the laws on the treatment of animals. Scientists are on the defensive over their experiments on animals. Farmers are criticised. But most people go on eating animals, demanding that the products that they eat or wear are tested, wanting better drugs or transplants or vaccines to save their lives.

By coming to some conclusions about methods for recognizing suffering, therefore, we have only just begun. There is a long way to go before reaching any final overall conclusions about the treatment of animals. This book cannot take us all the way. It is a guide to only a small part of the journey. But this final chapter will attempt to provide some stepping stones for the way ahead, by examining some of the difficulties over which people most often stumble in debates about animal welfare.

‘What about plants and “lower” animals?’

A difficulty raised by many people is that of where to draw the line. If it is thought that animals such as chimpanzees and pigs can suffer, how do we know that, say, apple-trees do not?
This difficulty is sometimes used to ridicule a concern for animal welfare on the grounds that once you start caring about some animals, you are then committed to giving equal weight to the suffering of all animals and plants, unless you make very arbitrary distinctions between different sorts of organisms. The arbitrariness of the distinctions is ridiculed and, with it, a concern for animal welfare.

Now there is nothing necessarily invalid about making somewhat arbitrary distinctions between different sorts of organisms. There is no clear cut-off point between youth and old age, or between night and day. But this does not mean that there is no difference between the extremes. Similarly, the fact that we may not be certain exactly where to draw the line does not invalidate the basic idea that some organisms can suffer greatly and others much less or not at all. We should not, therefore, give up caring for animals just because our care may have to have limits and we may not be certain exactly where those limits should be set.

In other walks of life, we accept arbitrary distinctions all the time. Most people agree, for example, that it is a good thing to have some sort of speed limit in built up areas. 70 mph would be much too fast. 5 mph would be much too slow. As Glover [68] points out, the actual limit of 30 mph is arbitrary in the sense that there is no evidence that a limit of 31 mph or 29 mph would not be just as effective.

There are various ways in which people have tried to deal with the problem of deciding which organisms they should care about and which they should care less about. Some of these are internally consistent but others, as we shall see, are much less so. The most radical way of drawing the line is to be equally concerned for the welfare of anything that is alive. This, however, puts cabbages on the same moral footing as whales and humans, and is therefore a view that most people find quite untenable. Rather less extreme is the idea that we should take account of the welfare of an organism if there is evidence that it can suffer. This is argued by Ryder [169], Singer [185] and Brophy [19], amongst others. The capacity to suffer is usually linked to the possession of a nervous