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ANIMAL LIBERATION AND THE LESSONS OF NATURE

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Although they provide catchy labels, "animal liberation" and "animal rights" have occasioned considerable misunderstanding and much pointless debate. I want, here, to explicate what I believe is being sought for animals under these labels. This explication should help to undo some of the misunderstandings about liberating animals and extending moral rights to them. After this explication, I will turn to the issue of the way in which scientific knowledge of natural entities, processes, and organizations is and is not relevant to animal liberation.

PART I: WHAT ANIMAL LIBERATION IS ABOUT

One of these misunderstandings concerns the use of "animal" in these labels. At most animal liberation presentations, there is someone who rises to inquire whether flies, cockroaches, and other vermin are to enjoy rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Is swatting a fly to be murder in the brave New World of animal rights? This heckler is soon joined, if not preceded, by another who accuses the animal liberationist of discriminating against plants and, consequently, being guilty of "fauna chauvinism." Do the arguments for animal liberation entail plant liberation as well? Of course, these hecklers are not sincere activists in the mosquito and tomato liberation movements. What they are attempting to do is to dispose of the animal liberation movement through a *reductio ad absurdum* argument. As William James noted many years ago, the first response to a revolutionary idea is ridicule.

The insect and flora *reductios* will not work, however, because most animal liberationists accept what has come to be called "the interest requirement" for having moral rights. According to this criterion, which was first proposed by Leonard Nelson in *A System of Ethics*, all and only beings with interests can have moral rights (Yale University Press 1956). Having interests is to be interpreted as follows: an individual has an interest in something if and only if that something affects (will affect, would affect) the individual's feelings of well-being. In turn, "feelings of well-being" is to be interpreted as referring to pleasure and pain, feeling fit and feeling ill, elation and depression, feelings of fulfillment and feelings of frustration, and the many other feelings which contribute to or detract from the enjoyment of or satisfaction with life. Now, the "animal" in "animal liberation" and "animal rights" refers to all and only those beings which meet the interest requirement. The phrase "sentient being" is often employed to make this reference.

Thus, the criterion for being an "animal," in this moral sense, is not the biological criterion which distinguishes fauna from flora. Nor are animal

liberationists confused about this, since most of them readily acknowledge that very probably not all biological animals have interests and, consequently, cannot have moral rights. As for the insects and the plants, all those which can meet the interest requirement must, if animal liberationists are to be consistent, be included in the concerns of this movement. However, to date, there has been no serious evidence showing that plants have feelings of well-being. Whether or which insects have interests is a more open question.

It does not follow from this, however, that the insect *reductio* carries the day against animal liberation. If some insects have feelings of well-being, then a morality which attempts to respect all sentient beings will be more complicated than it would be if no insects were sentient. Of course, this sort of consequence is true of all moralities; the more diverse the group owed respect, the more complicated the morality must be. For example, dealing morally with one's "fellows" is more complicated now that women and racial and ethnic minorities are included among the rights-holders due respect. To one degree or another, we probably all share a yearning for a simpler life, but that practicing a revolutionary morality would be more complicated than resting content with the *status quo* does not indicate that revolutionary morality is ridiculous, wrong, or even less warranted than the *status quo*.

Furthermore, acknowledging that some insects have moral rights would not by itself resolve the matter of how we are to deal with them, especially in conflict of interest situations. Since to have moral rights is not necessarily to have the same set of rights as or equal priority of rights with other rights-holders, extending moral rights to those who have not enjoyed them before does not settle the matter of how we are to treat them. Rather, it opens the door to questions about how we ought (morally) to treat them which had not previously seemed relevant (Caplan 1983). For example, the Emancipation Proclamation was not the culmination but the beginning of the civil rights movement. Also, in attempting to answer these new questions about how we ought (morally) to treat animals, if simple applications of ideas of equality, self-determination, and similar concepts commonly associated with liberation and rights would be ridiculous, then we can expect that those simple applications will, for that very reason, be rejected. This is what has happened in working out other liberation movements (e.g., the recent rejection of the claim that an end to sexual discrimination entails that male workers are entitled to maternity leave). In actual practice, ridiculous consequences do not discredit the basic principles of moral reform; rather, such consequences lead to a more

subtle and practical understanding of those principles—an understanding which eliminates the ridiculous consequences.

Finally, we may note that although these "where do you draw the line" questions may be amusing and conceptually intriguing, they are irrelevant to the current, major, practical concerns of the animal liberation movement (e.g., the immorality of factory farming, animal research, hunting, rodeos, etc.). If any non-human animals have interests, then the animals (e.g., pigs, monkeys, bears, horses, etc.) that the animal rights movement is currently seeking to liberate surely do. Once the questions currently being raised concerning how we ought (morally) to treat these animals have been settled, it may be time to wonder whether insects have moral rights, need to be liberated, and what form such an enlightened morality should take. To bring up the question of insects before these current questions have been resolved is merely an attempt to avoid facing the real and clear issues at hand.

"Liberation" also requires some explication when applied to animals. Advocates of liberating or extending moral rights to animals view this extension as being a revolutionary break with moral tradition, including the anti-cruelty to animals part of that tradition, and as providing for animals something of great moral importance. The predominant attitude regarding animal interests today is that what animals require for an enjoyable, satisfying life (e.g., freedom to roam, freedom from pain, and life itself) may be routinely sacrificed in the pursuit of human happiness, provided the animals are not treated sadistically and are spared suffering that can be conveniently and economically avoided. Thus, the anti-cruelty to animals tradition continues to consider and treat animals as fundamentally resources for human consumption, limiting moral concern to the humane handling and processing of those resources. On the other hand, "liberating" animals refers to putting an end to the routine sacrifice of animal interests for human benefit, even where the sacrifice is executed humanely.

Animal liberationists emphasize respecting the interests of animals themselves, as opposed to being solely or even primarily concerned with the interests that humans have in using animals. The primary purpose of extending moral rights to animals would be to ensure that their interests could be sacrificed for fulfilling the interests of others only in the sorts of situations and according to the sorts of principles which justify sacrificing the interests of some humans to fulfill the interests of others. For example, just as current regulations basically restrict risky medical research on humans to experiments which seem likely not only to benefit the wider community but also to be therapeutic (or otherwise beneficial) for the research subjects themselves, so the extension of moral rights to animals would basically limit risky medical research on animals to experiments which would have a good chance of being therapeutic (or otherwise beneficial) for the animal subjects of that research. Such a restriction would, of course go far beyond even the most liberal of our current humane regulations concerning the use and sacrifice of animals in biomedical research, and its adoption would mark a revolutionary step beyond our anti-cruelty to

animals tradition.

Thus, talk of "liberating" animals and extending moral "rights" to them refers to *changing our attitude* toward animals from one which regards them as beings which must be treated humanely but which are, nonetheless, fundamentally resources for fulfilling human interests to an attitude which regards animals as fellow beings whose interest in an enjoyable, satisfying life must be respected and protected in the way basic human interests are respected and protected. In this way, liberating animals would require changing our attitude toward animals in basically the same way liberating blacks and women requires changing the attitudes concerning them held by whites and men.

Another source of misunderstanding lies in the use of the phrase "equal rights" when discussing animal liberation. As already noted, animal liberationists routinely deny that they are seeking for animals the same set of rights already enjoyed by humans. Recognizing that rights are tied to interests and that animals do not have all the interests we do (e.g., in religion and education) animal liberationists recognize that it would be nonsensical to seek for animals all the rights we require. For example, Roger W. Galvin, the attorney who prosecuted the famous Taub case, proposes the following rights for animals: 1) all sentient beings have a right to live out their lives according to nature; 2) all sentient beings have a right to live in a habitat ecologically sufficient for normal existence; and 3) all sentient beings have a right to be free from exploitation (News magazine of the Animal Rights Network). These are sufficiently different from our "Bill of Rights" and "Declaration of the Universal Rights of Man" to make clear that animal liberationists are not seeking extensional equality of rights for animals.

It might be thought that what animal liberationists are seeking is completely equal priority of rights for animals. For example, it has been suggested that animal liberationists would feel an obligation to show no preference for feeding starving children over feeding starving dogs. However, once again matters are not nearly so simple. First of all, assertions of equal rights do not entail completely equal priority even among humans. For instance, people who believe that men, women and children have equal moral standing have, nonetheless, commonly believed that women and children should be given priority in an emergency. And conversely, no one would suggest that if we hold the traditional belief that women and children are entitled to first place in the lifeboats, consistency requires us to conclude that they would be justified in using men as research tools, eating them for dinner, and hunting them for sport.

We cannot infer from the principles used when we are forced to choose the lesser of two evils to the principles of moral status in force when such a hard choice is not required. Such emergency principles are invoked not as extensions of common moral principles, but as auxiliaries needed because those common principles do not provide satisfactory guidance in these uncommon situations. This distinction of ordinary from extraordinary cases in morality undercuts the many "burning building," "desert island," "lifeboat," etc.,

supposed *reductios* of the animal liberation position. That animals' lives could justifiably be sacrificed in preference to human lives in certain situations where such a hard choice had to be made, does not entail that their lives can (morally) be routinely sacrificed to support our eating habits, clothing preferences, entertainment, reluctance to control the size of our own population, unwillingness to adopt healthier ways of life, desire to avoid certain risks, etc. Consequently, such "them or us" cases are logically isolated and insignificant for the animal liberation debate, since that debate is primarily concerned with the principles governing our ordinary moral practice.

Thus, animal liberation seeks neither to extend to animals the same set of rights enjoyed by humans nor to deny that human life can have a greater moral worth than animal life. Rather, animal liberationists contend that just as it would be immoral to follow Swift's "modest proposal" routinely (and avoidably) to sacrifice some people's interest in life in order to fulfill others' interest in food, so it should be immoral routinely (and avoidably) to sacrifice animals' interest in life for such purposes (Swift 1729). Of course, what is and what is not "avoidable" will always be a slippery issue. The animal liberation literature suggests that, roughly, "avoidable" here means "eliminable without severely compromising the general welfare." For example, it is repeatedly emphasized in this literature that a vegetarian diet can be a healthy, appetizing one, that we can both keep warm and be ostentatious without furs, and that we can enjoy the wilderness without hunting. I am unaware of any animal liberationist saying something like, "We must liberate animals, even if that means an end to human civilization!" It should go without saying that issues of what is and what is not avoidable can become quite complex and must (logically) be decided on a case by case basis. What is important to the general animal liberation position is that the burden of proof is to be on those who would sacrifice animal interests for the general welfare, just as it is on those who would sacrifice the interests of some humans to help other humans (e.g., in time of war), and that justification requires demonstrating not merely some marginal increase in utility through the sacrifice but, rather, requires demonstrating both that prohibiting the sacrifice would severely compromise the general welfare (which is not to be restricted to human welfare) and that the sacrifice is distributed fairly.

It is in thus sharing legal and moral protections against the routine, avoidable sacrifice of one's interests that animal liberation seeks "equal rights" for animals.

PART II: THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SCIENTIFIC STUDY OF NATURE TO ANIMAL LIBERATION

One of the traditions of response to the animal liberation movement has been to portray it as the product of ignorance. Sometimes this is supposed to be ignorance of the nature of morality; sometimes it is supposed to be ignorance of how animals are actually treated in laboratories or on farms; sometimes it is supposed to be ignorance of the order of nature. For example, in a recent article entitled, "The natural wrongs about animal rights and animal liberation," Randall S. Ott, writes: "The beliefs espoused by animal rightists/liberationists are in conflict with scientific knowledge about the place of all

animals, including the human animal, in the biosphere" (Journal of American Veterinary Medical Assoc. 1995). Ott's claim is that science teaches us that all forms of life are in a struggle for the survival of the fittest, are living off one another in biotic communities, and that ideas of liberating animals are in conflict with such teachings. Is this so?

One of the well-established principles of moral philosophy is that "*ought* implies *can*." According to this principle, it would be nonsensical to say that we *ought* to do something, if it is *not possible* for us to do it. For example, a commandment that instructed us to live without breathing would be nonsensical, simply because we cannot do that. Moral imperatives are supposed to give us *practical* guidance; that is, to direct us toward doing what we can to make the world a better place. Consequently, proposed values which conflict with natural law, and therefore with what is physically possible, can have no place in actual moral practice.

Now, is it the case that animal liberation directs us to do things we cannot do? For instance, is it physically impossible for us to stop sacrificing animals in biomedical research? Is it physically impossible for us to stop factory farming animals? Is it physically impossible for us to stop sport hunting and trapping animals? The answer to these questions is that it is obviously possible for us to stop exploiting animals in these ways. While the law of gravity may prevent us from levitating ourselves just by wishing to do so, no law of evolutionary natural selection or ecological holism makes it impossible for us to stop exploiting animals in these ways. Since there are many people leading healthy, satisfying, reproductive lives who, for religious or ethical reasons, consciously avoid exploiting animals, it is mind-boggling that anyone would even think of saying that it is impossible for us to liberate animals from human exploitation. Anyone making such a preposterous claim must be woefully—and perhaps willfully—ignorant of the diverse ways in which people choose to live.

Since the advent of modern science, it has been common for some moralists to recommend patterning morality after science. In the 18th century, the science to emulate was physics, in the 19th century was biology, and in the latter half of the 20th century the science of ecology has become a candidate for moral paradigm. All such programs to transform morality into a science are logically doomed to failure for two reasons. The first is that, to cite a famous slogan, "you cannot derive an *ought* from an *is*." The second is that it is the function of moral imperatives to counterbalance natural tendencies.

A basic principle of logic is that any idea asserted in the conclusion of a valid argument must have some evidence to support it in the premises of that argument. It follows that any argument in which all the premises concern matters of fact, that is, concern the way things *are*, cannot justify a conclusion about the way things *ought to be*, precisely because the idea of *ought to* is not found in any of the premises. An argument of the form, "Driving bamboo shoots under people's fingernails causes them excruciating pain; therefore, we should not do that" is invalid, unless some sort of unstated, imperative premise, such as "We should not cause people excruciating pain," which contains the idea *should not* is

included. Thus, while the facts and principles discovered by science can be of immense help in accomplishing our moral goals, moral values can never follow just from scientific discoveries, and moral philosophy can never become an empirical science.

Turning to the second reason why morality cannot be a natural science, this is because we turn to morality precisely because we find our natural inclinations wanting. If by natural instinct we always did, or even just attempted to do, those things which would make the world a better place, we would have no need of moral imperatives to do this rather than that. Presumably, angels do not have to be commanded to respect the rights of others, for they have no inclination to do other than love others. We humans have aggressive, domineering, selfish, greedy, violent, and other inclinations which lead us routinely to destroy the well-being of others, humans as well as animals. We have elaborated and teach moral rules in an attempt to inhibit those destructive tendencies. Consequently, moral values never arise merely from a study of the way things are; they always arise from a study which includes projections of what would be a better world than the way things are.

Thus, the function that natural science can fulfill for morality is not and can never be that of establishing what is morally right and wrong. It can establish boundaries for moral imperatives by determining what it is physically possible for us to do, but this function is seldom important, since moralists seldom, if ever, command people to do what is physically impossible. Certainly, no animal liberationist of my acquaintance commands us to do what we cannot do. It does not follow, however, that because natural science cannot dominate morality, it has no function to perform for morality.

Another famous phrase is that, "the best laid plans of mice and men often go astray." Sometimes they go astray because people did not understand how to get where they were going. Morality is a program of trying to get somewhere, namely, to a better world. Understanding the way the world is, what forces have led to its being the way it is, what forces are available for changing it, and what forces obstruct such changes are all important factual understandings for those who would improve the world. For example, understanding why men want to dominate women, the different forms that tendency can take, what sorts of behavioral and pharmacological strategies are effective at inhibiting that tendency, and what the side effects of those strategies are, are all important understandings for someone who seeks effectively and without generating even greater problems to reduce the incidence of men battering women. People who espouse moral ideals but who do not learn the facts needed to

work effectively toward those ideals will be ineffective at best and are actually likely to cause a great deal of harm in their ignorant pursuit of good.

In the case of animal liberation, natural science can help us understand, first of all, what actually causes animal suffering and what may appear to do so but actually does not. For example, some animals like to cluster, so that confining them in areas that seem overcrowded from our perspective does them no harm. Similarly, natural science can help us find effective ways to relieve animal suffering. Again, science can help us find alternatives which satisfy our needs without exploiting animals. Finally, natural science objectively directed at ourselves could help us understand why we are inclined to exploit animals and what could be effective strategies for controlling the destructive expressions of those inclinations. For instance, why is it that some people enjoy killing animals, and what can be done to cure them of this disease?

In all areas of human endeavor, moral and otherwise, factual knowledge is useful for reaching the goals we seek. It is regrettable that well-meaning people sometimes waste valuable time and energy trying to make the world a better place, but failing to do so because they do not understand the natural forces which make the world the way it is and which need to be controlled in order to make it a better place. Animal liberationists need to inform themselves about natural science in order to be effective, just as morally concerned natural scientists need to inform themselves about logic and moral philosophy in order to understand how moral values originate and how moral reasoning works.

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