REVIEWS

The Review Section of E&A consists of three parts. The first is made up of brief reviews of books and articles (and perhaps films, etc.) that are concerned in some way with the rights and wrongs of human treatment of non-human animals. The second part of this Section is entitled 'Replies' and contains comments on or responses to reviews published in earlier issues of E&A. By letter the Editor invites the authors of works reviewed to respond, and by this proclamation in each issue invites all other interested readers to submit comments. The third part of the Reviews Section is a list of works of which reviews are invited. Any member who wishes to review any work in this continuing 'Reviews Needed' list should contact the Editor.


In "Morality and Animals" R. I. Sikora attempts to rebut some of the more common objections to the animal liberation movement. The article, however, is so carelessly constructed and filled with factual inaccuracies, sloppy thinking, and outright sophistry that it harms, more than it helps, that cause. Sikora dwells at length on facile and ludicrous arguments which deserve little or no attention in a serious philosophical journal, while ignoring more intelligent and considered objections which pose a serious threat to animal rights. Nowhere in the article do we get more than a passing glimpse of the philosophical roots of homocentric prejudice and exploitation of non-human animals. Sikora's response to those criticisms which deserve philosophical attention consists, for the most part, of a piecemeal rehash of arguments which have already been presented much more clearly and rigorously elsewhere. In some cases Sikora makes no attempt to argue at all, but merely asserts his disagreement. Nor is the article free of speciesist prejudice: particularly repugnant is Sikora's endorsement of the view that it is morally acceptable per se (i.e., abstracting from other circumstances which many be morally relevant) to breed animals for fatal experimentation or food as long as they are treated humanely prior to their demise.

The objections to animal rights which Sikora considers are the following:

1. animal pain is less important that human pain
2. human interests always take precedence over animal interests
3. there is no way of knowing whether animals feel pain
4. if we worry about animal pain we must also worry about plant pain
5. since a short life is better than no life, it is better for animals to be bred for slaughter than to have never existed
6. animals, by their very nature, cannot have rights

Objections #1 and #2 together constitute the general position that human and non-human animals do not deserve equal moral consideration, and that where a conflict occurs, preferential treatment should be accorded to humans -- the view, in short, that "humans come first." What underlies Sikora's inadequate response to this view is Peter Singer's thorough treatment of the question in Animal Liberation. There are two ways to defend
such a claim: by positing spurious criteria to distinguish humans from animals or by claiming that morality is based solely upon agreements (i.e., the contract theory), into which animals cannot enter. Sikora confuses the issue by treating separately the questions of conflicting pains and conflicting interests and by considering only one of the many irrelevant criteria used to justify preferential treatment of humans, namely, intelligence. His strategy is to point out that most people would be unwilling to extend their reasoning about the relevance of intelligence to human beings so as to claim that the pain of less intelligent people is less important. This is a very unsatisfactory response -- not only because some people might -- and indeed do -- maintain consistency by claiming that the pain of less intelligent people is of less importance, but also because it completely fails to make clear why intelligence is an irrelevant criterion for moral consideration.

Sikora uses the same method to criticize the contract theory: in certain situations we recognize that our actions toward other human beings should not be governed solely by agreements. Once again, it is far from obvious that all human beings do recognize this, and even if this were so, it would not explain what is wrong with the contract theory as the basis of morality.

Objections #3 and #4 should not even have been honored by a reply. They are the product of a fractious temperament which will seek any superficially clever excuse for continuing to abuse and exploit non-human animals. With so much pain and suffering in the world, both human and animal, it is almost immoral to engage in idle philosophical speculation as to how (or whether) it is possible to be certain that another living being is in pain. I am aware, of course, that my reasoning here involves a logical fallacy, which only goes to prove my point: obsession with logical proof of a blatantly obvious truth is a moral error. All one has to do to make the world morally inoperative is to engage in Systematic Cartesian Doubt, the equivalent, in the moral arena, of political filibustering. Sikora's rebuttal to these objections is the standard response already made by Singer and others, except that he omits, with regard to the question of plant pain, an essential point, namely that even if plants suffer pain, it is presumably less than what animals suffer, and hence we should still prefer to inflict pain on them rather than animals.

Granting that animal pain is as important as human pain, Sikora concludes that at least one of two criteria must be met for an experiment on a non-human animal to be justified: there must be good reason to believe that the experiment will either cause less suffering than it prevents or that if it were successful it would enormously reduce suffering, although the chances are it will not succeed. He fails to point out, however, another obvious conclusion which follows from the principle that animal pain is no less important that human pain, namely, that we should be equally willing to perform the experiment on a human being, assuming that in the particular case the human being will suffer no more pain that the animal. Further, we should be willing to inflict lesser pain on humans to prevent greater pain in non-human animals. If we are unwilling to do this it can only be due to speciesist prejudice, and our reluctance should lead us eventually to the realization that no experiment is justified unless it is for the benefit of the animal itself.

The objection might be made to this that there is a relevant difference
between human and non-human animals in that for the former it is a question not only of pain, but also of consent. To experiment on a human being against his will is to violate his right of consent. In the case of non-human animals, however, we cannot obtain their consent. Does this mean, however, that we are thereby entitled to act as though we didn’t need it? The cases of babies and idiots would seem to indicate that we do not always regard the lack of ability to consent as dispensation from the need to have it. In such cases we typically regard the infliction of pain as morally justified only if it benefits the person himself. We would not feel morally justified in taking it upon ourselves to assume that the person, were he able, would consent to suffer pain for someone else’s benefit.

Moreover, we usually assume that there must be an intrinsic connection between the pain suffered and the benefit reaped, such that suffering the pain is necessary in order to reap the benefit. Such a connection clearly exists in the example cited by Sikora of a child who needs a painful operation. There is no such connection, however, in the example he gives of "rewards" accorded to animals as compensation for being the subjects of experiments.

The hypocrisy of Sikora’s position becomes even clearer when he considers the case of fatal experiments, where no possible compensation can be provided afterwards to the animal. The argument he presents here reads more like propaganda from Charles River Laboratories than a philosophical argument. The gist of it is that since laboratory animals are bred for experimentation and would not have existed at all were it not for the vivisections, and since a short, happy life is better than no life at all, experimentation is justified, provided the animal is well treated prior to experimentation. The "reward," in other words, is given in advance.

In Sikora’s account there are actually two "benefits" which are confused with one another. The first is the mere fact of having been brought into existence. The second is the fact of having been humanely prior to experimentation. That it is nonsensical to speak of conferring the benefit of existence on a "non-existent being" has already been clearly demonstrated by Peter Singer, Sikora’s disclaimers notwithstanding. His remarks in this regard are sheer sophistry. The fact that we prefer, once we are alive, not to die, in no way proves that it is meaningful to speak of conferring a benefit on a "non-existent being," by bringing "it" into existence. Nor is the example which he gives later of a supposed duty to a "non-existent being" valid. A woman’s moral duty not to bring a defective child into the world is not a duty to a "not-yet-existent defective child" but to the actual child who will suffer if she conceives and bears him. It is an actual being, rather than a potential being, which is affected in this case.

So far as the benefit of bestowing a happy life upon the animal is concerned, it is obvious that in this case there is no intrinsic connection between the pain and the reward. It is ludicrous and appalling to claim that the infliction of evil (assuming that pain is an evil) is justified by the bestowal of good. Sikora admits he would not be willing to pursue this policy with regard to human beings, yet believes that it is not speciesist because human beings, unlike animals, would know what was in store for them, and because they characteristically have much richer lives than animals. Would Sikora be willing, then, to breed defective human beings for experimentation? If not, then he is vulnerable to the charge of specie­s­ism.

The same criticisms apply to Sikora’s response to the fifth objection. One does not have to point to the
unlikelihood of humane conditions on factory farms or the world hunger problem to recognize the absurdity of the claim that the benefit of bringing "non-existent beings" into existence and treating them humanely justifies slaughtering them for food. It is sufficient to realize, once again, that the bestowal of good can never serve as a sufficient moral ground for the infliction of evil. As in the previous case, the same argument could obviously be applied to defective human beings. Would Sikora grant the moral acceptability of raising such humans for food? If not, he is once again open to the charge of speciesism. From the standpoint of the animal rights activist Sikora's position on laboratory experimentation and meat eating thus appears quite reactionary. It sanctions and reinforces the still prevailing ethic of homocentric exploitation of animals.

In his discussion of the final objection -- that animals by their very nature cannot have rights -- Sikora fails to explicate the philosophical grounds for denial or attribution of rights, but contents himself with outlining the bases for recognition of obligations to animals by those who deny them rights. He does manage, however, to further damage the cause of animal liberation by making the preposterous claim that obligations are more crucial to animal welfare than rights. This is based on the arbitrary example of two individuals, one of whom denies animals all rights but recognizes our obligation to neither torture nor kill them, the other of whom recognizes both our obligation and animals' rights to freedom from torture, but neither our obligation nor animals' rights to freedom from killing. This example obviously proves nothing about the fundamentality or importance of obligations vs. rights. In point of fact, since rights always entail obligations but obligations (in the view of many) do not necessarily entail rights, the recognition of rights is far more crucial to animal welfare.

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