

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.) which are concerned in some way with the rights and wrongs of human treatment of non-human animals. These reviews will be both critical and reportive--primarily reportive in the case of most scientific and historical material, and increasingly critical as the material is more argumentative and philosophical. The second part of this Section is entitled 'Second Opinions' and contains second (and usually dissenting) reviews of works reviewed in the first part in earlier numbers of E&A. After a review appears in E&A (and after the 'second opinion' if one appears within the next two numbers) the Editor will invite the author of the original work to submit a brief rejoinder to the review(s). Rejoinders received will appear in the third part of the Review Section. Members of the SSEA who wish to submit reviews (first or second), or recommend works for review, should contact the Editor.

Books

R. G. Frey. INTERESTS AND RIGHTS: THE CASE AGAINST ANIMALS (Oxford University Press), 1980.

This book might be more accurately subtitled: the case against the case for animals. It is an attack on the most popular philosophical argument for some form of animal liberation. Frey argues that "the Nelsonian argument for the moral rights of animals fails: its major premiss--that all and only beings which (can) have interests (can) have moral rights--is dubious, and its minor premiss--that animals as well as humans (can) have interests--is false." One might have thought that the minor premiss could be established to most people's satisfaction and that the real work would come in evaluating the major premiss. Frey, however, says little about the major premiss; most of his book is devoted to trying to show that the minor premiss is false. It turns out on Frey's views, remarkably enough, that animals do not have interests, desires, beliefs, emotions, perceptions, or reasons. The linchpin is the denial that animals have beliefs.

If 'have interests' means 'have a good or well-being which can be harmed or benefited' or 'have needs', then animals have interests, says Frey, but so do tractors--so that can't be the relevant sense of 'interest'. If 'have interests' means 'have wants', in the sense of 'have desires', then animals do not have interests because they do not have desires. They do not have desires because they do not have beliefs. They do not have beliefs because they do not have language. Because they do not have beliefs, they also do not have perceptions, reasons, emotions, or moral feelings. The bulk of Frey's slim volume is devoted to developing these claims; it is not possible for me to consider here the details of his arguments, which merit consideration by philosophers, though I suspect that his dry and graceless prose will deter nonspecialists.

But how does this bear on the question of how we should treat nonhumans? One might have thought that if they have no interests (indeed can't have interests) then that is the end of the matter. Apparently not. "But can animals be wronged," asks Frey in his Postscript,

"even if they have no interests? Yes, they can. For . . . the 'higher' animals can suffer unpleasant sensations and so . . . can be hurt; and wantonly hurting them, just as wantonly hurting human beings demands justifications, if it is not to be condemned." Indeed, Frey says in his final paragraph that "questions can still be raised about our treatment of animals." What, then, have we learned? We have learned, according to Frey, that "the answers cannot now consist in appeal to or reliance upon moral rights." I have no quarrel with this, but it is not enough. While some versions of the pro-animal argument have been tied to analyses of rights, others have not. Peter Singer's, for example, is not--as Frey recognizes--and Singer's version is certainly the one most influential among philosophers.

The problem with Frey's case against animals (at least, one problem) is that it is too broad. He has no faith in the concept of rights; he doesn't really believe that humans have moral rights either. "And one important thing this means is that we have no moral right to an animal's confinement in zoos, to its ceaseless drudgery and labour on our behalf, to its persistent exploitation in the name of cosmetics, clothing, entertainment; and sport, to its blindness, dismemberment, and ultimate death in the name of science, and, to be sure, to its appearance on our dining-tables." The argument that animals don't have rights has always taken place against the background assumption that humans do; if animals had no moral rights, while humans did, then animals were thought to occupy a lower moral status than humans. This traditional argument attempted to answer moral questions about how, at least in general, animal welfare ought to be weighed against human welfare. Frey's argument, however, offers no such answers; perhaps they are to be expected in the book, MODERN MORAL VEGETARIANISM, which he tells us is in preparation. The present book, however, does not in the end make a concrete case either for or against animals.

Frey's argument sometimes seems to reach beyond the context where debate about the moral status of nonhumans makes sense, as when he attacks the assumption that pain is in itself bad. "Why should unpleasant sensations be regarded as intrinsically evil?" Indeed, Frey considers it a "very real possibility" that nothing has intrinsic value (positive or negative).

Such matters are certainly worth considering. Though I find many of Frey's arguments confused or unconvincing, I think there are some interesting questions buried in this book. But there is no reason to believe that their answers will tell against animals any more than against us nonanimals.

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