

DALE JAMIESON, "RATIONAL EGOISM AND ANIMAL RIGHTS," ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS, Summer, 1981, (Vol. 3, #2), pp. 167-171.

In his article "Animal Rights" (CJP 7 [1977], pp. 161-178), Jan Narveson presents an alternative moral theory to what he calls the "Singer-Regan position." This theory - rational egoism - would exclude non-human animals from moral consideration and deny them all rights. Regan replied to this argument in his article "Narveson on Egoism and the Rights of Animals" (CJP 7 [1977], pp. 179-186). Now Dale Jamieson has entered the debate with his "Rational Egoism and Animal Rights," a critique both of Narveson's position and of Regan's rebuttal.

Narveson's argument, briefly, is as follows: rights are based solely on agreements between rational egoists which foster the mutual attainment of self-interested ends. I acknowledge someone else's self-interested claim

as a right so that he will acknowledge mine in turn. Non-human animals can neither assert self-interested claims as rights nor force human beings to acknowledge them through the coercive power to infringe on their corresponding rights. Hence non-human animals have no rights. We are therefore morally entitled to abuse them in any way we choose, so long as we do not violate our own self-interest.

Jamieson points out that this theory also denies rights to mental defectives and to young children. How does Narveson ensure that these "rightless" humans will not be abused? He argues that the very self-interest which is the basis of rights dictates that we treat these humans as though they had rights. A rational egoist will treat children equally because the self-interests of parents includes the self-interest of their children and because he has nothing to gain from abusing other people's children. He will treat morons equally lest he not be treated equally were he to become a moron. To this "rational" argument Narveson appends two "non-rational" bases for equal treatment of morons. The first is that a moron's rational relatives may have a "sentimental interest" in his being treated equally. The other factor is "sentiment-generalization," the human tendency to extend sympathy to members of one's own race, species, etc.

In their replies to Narveson, both Regan and Jamieson try to show that considerations of self-interest will not guarantee that morons and children will be treated equally. Regan limits himself to the case of idiots, arguing that it is unnecessary, from the perspective of rational egoism, to accord equal treatment to all idiots in order to guarantee protection for oneself in the event that one became an idiot. All that

would be necessary would be to guarantee continued equal treatment of all those who became idiots. This leaves the door open for the abuse of congenital idiots since such abuse would in no way violate the rational egoists' self-interests. Nor would "sentimental interest" guarantee equal treatment of congenital idiots since many of them are not the object of such interest.

Jamieson criticizes Regan's second point on the grounds that a rational egoist could respond that the "epistemological problem" involved in determining who is the object of sentimental interest is so severe that all idiots should be included in the "ambit of morality." This seems to me a rather quibbling, if not patently false objection to Regan's argument.

Nor are Jamieson's own arguments any stronger. He asserts that the concept of egoistic self-interest is fluid and that we consequently might come to the view that idiots are "obscene moral failures" who should be exterminated. Such an alteration in rational egoists' concepts of their own self-interest would result in the abuse of idiots being mandated by self-interest.

Jamieson also hypothesizes that a population explosion could result in a view of human fetuses as a threat to survival and as therefore contrary to one's self-interests. Were this to happen we might resort to cannibalism. Anything, of course, is possible, but these "fables," as Jamieson calls them, bear more resemblance to the idle and rather paranoid speculations which support domino theories in politics than to a cogent retort to rational egoism.

Jamieson's argument, however, suffers from more serious defects than implausibility. In the first place, it is not even relevant except

to the extent that Narveson is inconsistent in his reasoning, i.e., is not a pure rational egoist. A consistent rational egoist has no reason to share Jamieson's concern for "marginal cases." Mistreatment of children and morons can be of no moral concern to a consistent rational egoist unless it results in the reduction of his own self-interest.

Insofar as Narveson is inconsistently concerned about children and idiots, this is an indication of his implicit acceptance of a moral premise which runs against the doctrine of rational egoism. This is the chief flaw in his argument which should be examined, but Jamieson totally ignores it.

Moreover, his approach is defective in principle, for it leaves open the possibility of justifying the continued abuse of non-human animals. By accepting the issue on Narveson's own terms, Jamieson grants him the opportunity to try to produce more convincing arguments from self-interest for the equal treatment of children and idiots. Were he successful in doing this, then the continued abuse of animals would be justified on the principles of rational egoism.

Jamieson's argument is thus incorrigibly speciesist: he argues, in effect, that it is wrong to abuse animals because it may lead to the abuse of human beings. Thus when he concludes his article by saying that "because it is a bad moral theory, rational egoism fails to provide a solid basis for a principled indifference to the suffering of animals," he is certainly correct, but not at all in the way he imagines. Rational egoism is a "bad moral theory," not because the equal treatment of children and idiots cannot be guaranteed by considerations of egoistic self-interest, but because

the exclusion of non-human animals (as well as children and idiots) from ethical consideration is a moral outrage which is totally unjustified if one accepts what I take to be a self-evident moral principle: viz. that pain is an evil, the deliberate, unnecessary infliction of which is always morally wrong.

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