

Replies

(Ref. ETHICS AND ANIMALS I/2
Review by JOHNSON of THE CASE
OF THE ANIMALS VS. MAN BEFORE
THE KING OF THE JINN; ETHICS
AND ANIMALS II/2 Reply by
GOODMAN)

In his reply to my review, Professor Goodman asserts: ". . . if suffering is involved in frustration of all desires, the fact that the desires in question are unlearned is irrelevant. The mention [by Peter Singer in Animal Liberation] of the innateness of desires seems to me to appeal to another (albeit natural) standard of value beyond the pleasure/pain calculus, namely naturalness."

Is this a correct interpretation of Singer's argument? I believe not, as I indicated in my review. Singer's point is not that what is innate or natural has value ipso facto. Rather, the point of saying that the desires frustrated are innate is to emphasize that they do not have to be learned. Singer is arguing against those who have claimed that because the animal has never known any other life, it cannot be suffering. (See Animal

Liberation [1975], pp. 139, 142.)

Singer is not committed to the view that, as Goodman puts it, "wrong has been done because nature is not allowed to run in its own course." In fact, I believe Singer would firmly (and rightly) reject such a view. But Singer can speak better than I about what he did or didn't mean.

Professor Goodman also complains about my omitting mention of "existential claims to virtual subjecthood" in a passage I quoted which expresses one of his "central ideas." I omitted it because it seemed to me inessential and, frankly, because I had no idea what it meant. I still don't. Apparently, however, in foreshortening for the sake of intelligibility I inadvertently managed to suggest to Goodman that his "foundation for animal deserts is subjective rather than ontological and recognizable by (age old but here newly analyzed) projective (and rhetorical) devices." I didn't mean to suggest that. Indeed, I don't understand that any better than I do "existential claims to virtual subjecthood."

It would be unreasonable, however, to expect Goodman to explain in the brief space of a reply what is undoubtedly a difficult and complex notion. He mentions that he has discussed the idea in some of his other works. I hope that he will write back and give references. No doubt other readers of this journal would also be interested in learning more about "virtual subjecthood as a foundation for the recognition of . . . a general theory of deserts."

Edward Johnson
University of New Orleans

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In Ethics and Animals, Volume 2, No. 2, Lenn Goodman says that he can find two arguments in my book Animal Liberation where Edward Johnson found only one. Johnson claimed that my objection to factory farming was simply based on the fact that it causes animal suffering. Lenn Goodman suggests that in addition to this consideration, I also appeal to the unnaturalness of the degree of confinement. He therefore finds an implication that "wrong has been done because nature is not allowed to run its own course." I am happy to be able to clear up this disagreement. Edward Johnson got it right. My ethical argument is based entirely on the degree of suffering involved in factory farming. It may sometimes be relevant to this suffering that factory farming frustrates desires which animals naturally have. The fact that the desires are "natural" or "unlearned" is relevant only in so far as it indicates that even a bird or an animal which has been brought up in confined conditions from birth will experience desires that are frustrated in factory farms. Birds and animals are usually well adapted for the conditions in which they naturally live. Conditions which are quite unnatural are therefore likely to frustrate their innate desires and to cause suffering.

On this basis I do not consider unnaturalness to be intrinsically wrong. To take this position would be contrary to views that I hold in other areas of ethics where I think that it is irrelevant to object to contraception, for example, that it is

an unnatural interference with human reproduction.

Peter Singer
Monash University
Australia

(MORE OF THE SAME)

Professor Harlan B. Miller
Department of Philosophy & Religion
Virginia Polytechnic Institute
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Dear Dr. Miller:

In a letter to me of August 12th, apparently written at the same instance as his letter to you, Peter Singer writes "I hope I had not misled you with the expressions that you have quoted. Animal Liberation was not written exclusively or even primarily for an audience of philosophers and for that reason I may sometimes be guilty of writing in a way that would have the greatest possible impact on a general audience rather than in a way that is absolutely and literally accurate from a philosophical point of view." In view of this admission and the passages quoted in my last letter, I think the issue is rather clear. Whether I "got it right" or "got it wrong" does not quite strike the right note. If Singer's rhetoric is inconsistent with what he takes to be his more rigorously held views, the problem lies either in the rhetoric or in the philosophy or in the character who unites the two. My task in my philosophical introduction to The Case of the Animals vs. Man was (in the passage that apparently stopped Mr. Johnson) to tease out the assumptions employed in appeals for animal rights, not to attempt to

harmonize the premises of those appeals with other views of those who make them. I agree with Singer that there are problems with trying to render the idea of non-interference with nature categorical and respect his reluctance to make that attempt. I allude to some of those problems under the rubric of the word 'romantic.' But Singer's rhetoric does employ the notion of non-disturbance of nature and elicits part of its response on the basis of an expectation that the idea of naturalness will evoke some sentiments of protectiveness of the natural on the part of the reader. If Mr. Singer wishes to disown the sentiments to which he appeals, candor would require him to do so publicly. After all, it was the dialectical employment of premises they did not themselves hold that gave a bad name to many of Socrates' most intellectually challenging contemporaries.

Sincerely,*

L. E. Goodman, D.Phil.
Professor of Philosophy

*i.e. in hopes that my rhetoric comports well with my sense.