

Bernard E. Rollin, *Animal Rights and Human Morality*
(Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1981)

Professor Rollin is well known to most readers of this journal, at least by name and reputation. He has logged more miles and spoken to more people on behalf of animals than any other philosopher I can think of, save Peter Singer. Now Rollin has brought out a book. I think it is a very good book, one that should be read by anyone who is in any way concerned with animals. Unfortunately, I fear that many who should learn from this book will not.

Animal Rights and Human Morality is divided into four parts. Part one is "Moral Theory and Animals." It is a 65-page sketch of a moral theory and its application to animals. Although the theory is interesting and

suggestive, philosophers will complain that it is not presented in enough detail. Non-philosophers will probably think that it is boring and nit-picking. Part Two is "Animal Rights and Legal Rights." Here Rollin reasons from premises supplied by Ronald Dworkin to the conclusion that if the moral claims of Part One are true, animals should be granted legal rights. Philosophers will be bothered by Rollin's apparently uncritical acceptance of Dworkin's views on the relation between morality and law. Non-philosophers are apt to think that the claim this section is meant to establish is obvious. Part Three is "The Use and Abuse of Animals in Research." This is the best part of a very good book. Not only is the main

theme of the ethics of animal experimentation treated in an interesting and competent way, but there are also stimulating asides on science education, the role of humanists in science, science policy, and general issues in philosophy of science.

At least one scientist has already responded hysterically to Rollin's critique, and at least one animal rights advocate has accused Rollin of lacking moral purity, as we shall see below. Part Four is "Morality and Pet Animals." To the best of my knowledge, this is the first time a philosopher has treated this subject at any length. Like puppies and kittens, this section should win the affection of almost everyone.

So what is the problem? Here is a very good book that many people who should know better will ignore or dislike. Why?

Rollin does not conform to the standard stereotypes. Neither do his views. He is neither a "sadistic vivisectionist" nor a "bleeding heart humaniac." He is an "analytic" philosopher who became interested in the moral status of animals while researching an earlier book on philosophy of language. He has also published extensively on the eighteenth-century German philosopher, Immanuel Kant, and Kant's influence on Rollin's views in moral philosophy is quite clear. But in addition to his background in analytic philosophy, Rollin is also a Professor of Physiology and Biophysics. He regularly teaches veterinary medical ethics in a College of Veterinary Medicine, and he co-teaches a year-long honors course in basic biology. In short, he seems neither fish nor fowl. He is, perhaps, too sympathetic to science for those in the humane movement, and too sympathetic to animals for those in the sciences; and too sympathetic to both science and animals for many

philosophers.

That this is so can be seen by examining two recent reviews of *Animal Rights and Human Morality*. The first appeared in the *New England Journal of Medicine* for May 27, 1982. It was written by Maurice B. Visscher (M.D., Ph.D.) of the University of Minnesota. Visscher writes:

Rollin has attempted to demolish all the ethical bases that have been used to justify the humane use of lower animals. Ethics and morals are notorious for their dependence on some agreed-on basic assumptions. Rollin states his own position on morals in a very dogmatic fashion. (p. 1303)

Visscher seems to misunderstand the nature of ethics and moral philosophy. First, ethics is not "notorious" for its dependence on shared basic assumptions. The mainstreams of both the Kantian and Utilitarian traditions hold that what is right and good is utterly independent of what people think is right and good, or what people's "agreed on basic assumption(s)" may be. Contractarians would disagree, but that is not surprising. Questions about the foundations of ethics and morality are philosophical questions, resolvable only by philosophical dialogue and rational discourse. This leads us to a second interesting claim in the quoted passage: that Rollin states his own position in a dogmatic fashion. In truth, like most philosophers, Rollin gives arguments and adduces considerations for his views. One may challenge the cogency of Rollin's arguments, but it would be fatuous or worse to deny their existence. Perhaps Visscher thinks that the assertion of any moral views, especially unconventional ones, is "dogmatic." God forbid he should stumble into a class on moral philosophy. Not only would he see "dogmatism," but competing "dogmatisms" in

conflict.

Visscher goes on to say:

The author is somewhat less candid about the sponsorship under which he writes. Only by careful reading of the introduction does it become evident that this work was subsidized by the Humane Society of the United States. This organization is familiar to scientists as a vigorous opponent of animal experimentation (p. 1303)

Here there are several falsehoods strung together in the service of a bad argument.

The humane society is evil.

Rollin's work was "subsidized" by the Humane Society.

Therefore, Rollin's work is evil.

Arguments of this form have again become fashionable. Here is another example:

Communists are evil.

The nuclear freeze campaign is supported by communists.

Therefore, the nuclear freeze campaign is evil.

But the logic of the argument aside, Visscher simply has his facts wrong. Rollin is very straightforward about his association with the Humane Society. He writes:

I am especially grateful to John Hoyt, president of the Humane Society of the United States, for his commitment to this book, and for his willingness to provide the support of the

Humane Society of the United States to ensure its publication. (p. xii)

It is not clear from this passage what financial relationship, if any, exists between Rollin and HSUS. (Perhaps Visscher knows something we don't.) I would be willing to bet, however, that while Rollin's research is "subsidized," Visscher's is "supported." (See Rollin's chapter on "The Debasing of Language in Science.") Moreover, it comes as a surprise to me to learn that HSUS is a "vigorous opponent of animal experimentation." I thought they were a mild supporter of some restrictions on some research involving animals. Perhaps that is enough in Visscher's circles to be counted as a "vigorous" opponent of animal experimentation."

Visscher quotes Rollin as making the familiar point, reminiscent of Plato, that if power confers moral legitimacy, then it would follow that the monstrous actions of the Nazis would have been morally legitimate. This, of course, is an argument against the thesis that power confers moral legitimacy. Visscher writes:

Although Rollin does not exonerate the Nazis, in effect he does so by comparing the killing of lower animals for science with the atrocities of the Holocaust. (p. 1303)

In ten years of reading freshman essays, I have never seen a more egregious misunderstanding of a *reductio* argument.

Towards the end of his review, Visscher tries to put Rollin's book in perspective.

It is probably no accident that very few persons with extensive scientific education are activists in the animal humane

movement . . . Few physicians will care to read this book . . . but its appearance at this time is evidence that the anti-science group in America is becoming more vociferous . . . (pp. 1303-4)

After quoting an Associated Press report of an Animal Liberation Front action which liberated a number of laboratory animals in England, he informs us (again to my surprise) of "a comparable raid involving the National Institutes of Health." (p. 1304) What does this have to do with the book under review?

"Rollin's writings will give a false cloak of morality to such behavior." (p. 1304)

Visscher concludes with somber and foreboding words:

Like creation science, animal liberation based on speciesism is likely to be with us for a long time. The rational segment of society must work diligently to counter their pernicious influences on biologic science. (p. 1304)

What are we to make of this? It is not easy to respond in an open and honest way to searching criticism, whatever one does for a living. Even so, there are many scientists who would find Visscher's review as misinformed and ill-argued, not to mention arrogant, as I. There is an awakening in the scientific community, bringing with it a new sense of moral and social responsibility, and we would do well to remember that. Still, there are a great many scientists who share Visscher's outlook. Many of them are intelligent people who are otherwise morally sensitive. What accounts for the complete collapse of intellectual rigor when it comes to self-examination?

Interestingly enough, Rollin's book provides part of the answer. To greatly oversimplify his discussion on pages 107 and following, scientists are not trained to be Newtons and Einsteins, relentless questioners with a sense of wonder about the workings of nature. Instead science education emphasizes technique, manipulation of data, and manual dexterity at the expense of theoretical sophistication and originality. As Rollin writes:

[The undergraduate] tests . . . are typically short answer, true or false, or multiple choice, geared to the regurgitation of discrete bits of information. (p. 108)

. . . the graduate student is essentially handed a problem for research by the advisor and even handed the ground rules for possible solutions. This is his apprenticeship - if he succeeds, or makes headway, he is certified as a member of the field and is entitled to pursue these puzzles, seek funding, and replicate himself through his graduate students. (p. 109)

This process leads to conformity not only in theory and practice, but in dress, mode of speech, professional etiquette, carriage and deportment. In such a context concern for animals, and moral reflection generally, is all too often seen as sentimentality, squeamishness, and lack of professionalism.

But scientists are not alone in failing to understand and appreciate Rollin's book. Mort Frankel, writing in *Agenda* for May/June 1982, charges Rollin with "the exaltation of science over all else." (p. 29) This hardly sounds like the same man whom Visscher lumps with the creationists as part of a rising tide of anti-science hysteria.

According to Frankel, Rollin has written two books. In the first "he ably restates valuable truths that have already been published many times within the last decade." (p. 30) In the second, Rollin takes it all back.

In support of his new position, which adds up to experimentation-with-kindness and vivisection-when-necessary, he pleads the importance of "habits and traditions entrenched by time and nurtured by expediency." (p. 28)

Professor Rollin's general stance is that of a dedicated team player who, however much wedded to justice, kindness, integrity and all laudable things, is guided by one paramount principle: "Don't rock the boat." If the benefits of "science as we know it" conflict with what we believe is right, then too bad about what we believe is right. (p. 29)

There are two kinds of responses one could make to Frankel. One would consist in a philosophical discourse on the relation of theory to practice. It might note along the way that the moral theory which Rollin sketches in Part One is not absolutist. Rollin is a Kantian, but he is also sensible. Although I think that ultimately such a position (sensible Kantianism) is untenable, never mind for now. The point is that Rollin is no abolitionist in Part One or anywhere else.

But discussing the issue in this way is really to miss the point. Rollin's book comes from a particular institutional and theoretical locus. He is involved in the day-to-day business of science education. He works in an environment in which the well-entrenched tendency is to view animals

as disposable laboratory equipment. Rollin is aware of the problems and thought-patterns of working scientists. As a result he is unwilling to accept the easy shibboleth promulgated by so many unknowledgeable people in the animal liberation movement that alternatives to animals are there waiting, if only nasty scientists would avail themselves of them. But although Rollin sees science from the inside, he has done more than his share of boat-rocking (contrary to Frankel's remark, in its own way as arrogant as anything of Visscher's).

Unlike Rollin, most animal liberationists live and work in institutions far removed from the pain and suffering of which they write and speak. All too often we in the movement are too willing to benefit from the exploitation of animals while condemning those who do the exploiting. And when we are consistent enough not to do that, we engage in interminable debates about moral purity that give fundamentalist theology a good name by comparison. And, as Rollin reminds us, the question that should always loom before us is this: Are the animals better off in virtue of our efforts? And all too often the answer is No.

Rollin's book is important because it speaks to all sides of these issues from positions which they desperately need to better appreciate. To scientists he offers the perspective of someone in sympathy with their aims and goals, who has a moral consciousness as well, one that is rigorous and well-argued, not syrupy and sentimental. To animal liberationists, he offers the perspective of someone on the side of the angels who understands the practical difficulties involved in putting our principles into action. It would be a pity if a book explicitly intended to help the animals by promoting dialogue between the humans should fail because of the

blindness and prejudice of both sides.

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