

ARTICLE

Predation

In discussions of animal rights, the issue of predation is usually raised as the basis for a *reductio ad absurdum* objection:

(1) Suppose humans were obligated to alleviate avoidable animal suffering.

(2) Animals suffer when they are preyed upon by other animals.

(3) Therefore, humans would be obligated to prevent predation.

(4) But such an obligation would be absurd.

(5) Therefore, contrary to hypothesis, humans are not obligated to alleviate avoidable animal suffering.

There are three ways in which this argument may be successfully countered:

- I. Challenging the evaluation in (4),
- II. Challenging that (3) follows from (1) and (2),
- III. Challenging that (5) follows from (1) through (4).

I shall develop each of these response strategies in turn. But before doing so, I want to spend a moment discussing and dismissing some not uncommon, faulty responses to the predation *reductio*.

One such response runs as follows:

Moral obligations are directed toward rational agents, who can inhibit or extend their activity in recognition of those obligations. But animals are not rational agents, or, at

least, they are not sufficiently rational to recognize and respond to moral obligations. Therefore, a moral obligation for humans to alleviate avoidable animal suffering cannot entail an obligation for animals not to be predatory.

This response attempts to follow the second strategy noted above. That is, it challenges the inference from (1) to (3) in the predation *reductio*.

The problem with this response is that it misinterprets (3). The conclusion reached in (3) is not that *animals* are obligated to stop being predators. (3) asserts that we are obligated to prevent predation. Consequently, the inference from (1) to (3) does not even raise the issue of a moral obligation had by predatory animals which they should somehow recognize and observe.

It might be countered that it does not make sense to conclude that we have an obligation to prevent animals from being predators unless they are obligated not to be predators. It would then follow that even if the inference from (1) to (3) does not involve an explicit claim that animals are subjects of moral obligation, it presumes that they are.

Such a counter-argument would be mistaken. There is no conceptual problem with the idea that we, as moral agents, should be obligated to prevent others, who are not moral agents, from doing harm. We routinely apply this idea when we hold parents responsible for preventing their pre-moral children from doing harm. That a young child "does not

know any better" does not prevent us from having an obligation to stop him/her from tormenting the cat. So, that the cat does not know any better cannot prevent us from having an obligation to stop him/her from killing birds. Consequently, this attempt to defeat the inference from (1) to (3) fails.

A second faulty response to the predation *reductio* runs something like this:

Since animals cannot be obligated not to be predators, there is nothing wrong with their being predators. But we cannot be morally obligated to prevent predation, if there is nothing wrong with it.

This objection implicitly challenges the moral significance of (2) in the predation *reductio* by presuming that the moral value of an action derives entirely from the agent's responding or not responding to moral rules.

That presumption is mistaken. Consider once again the example of a young child tormenting a cat. The child may be too young to recognize and respond to humane moral obligations. However, while this may influence our evaluation of his/her character and responsibility for his/her actions, it does not lead us to conclude that there is nothing wrong with his/her tormenting the cat. Tormenting cats remains a wrong, whether it is done by someone who "ought to know better" or by someone who "can't tell right from wrong." To take another example, if we determine that someone is criminally insane, i.e., is incapable of distinguishing right from wrong, this affects our evaluation of his/her responsibility for his/her actions and whether he/she deserves punishment for them. However, it does not lead us to conclude that there was nothing wrong with

those actions. That they were committed by the criminally insane does not make cases of unjustified homicide and forced sexual intercourse morally neutral; they are still cases of murder and rape.

Being unable to distinguish right from wrong may leave the agent "innocent," in the sense of "not culpable," but it does not leave his/her actions "innocent," in the sense of "being neither right nor wrong." Those actions may still be right or wrong; it is just that the agent cannot recognize this. While Kantians are correct when they emphasize that actions done for different reasons may have different moral values, they are not correct when they conclude that the entire moral value of an action derives from the agent's will. There are agent-independent dimensions to our moral evaluations, such as those concerning the consequences of actions, as well as agent-dependent dimensions.¹ Consequently, there could be a wrong for us to right in predation, even if that wrong cannot be the animals' failure to fulfill their moral obligations. So, this second response to the predation *reductio* also fails.

The last of the common but faulty responses we will consider runs as follows:

In being predators, animals are just following their nature. We should respect the natural needs and impulses of others. Therefore, we should not interfere with predation.

This response again challenges the moral significance of (2) in the predation *reductio*, this time by presuming that respecting nature has a higher priority among our moral values than does preventing suffering.

At the very least, this presumption

is not obviously true.² One of the fundamental and pervasive functions of moral rules and education is to delimit and inhibit the ways in which native needs may be fulfilled and natural impulses may be pursued. Especially when some of us "doing what comes naturally" results in the suffering or death of others, the standard moral response is that here is an aspect or expression of human nature which does not merit our respect. Examples of this would be our lack of moral respect for and many efforts to delimit and inhibit our tendencies to aggression and dominance. We may also note that we simply do not accept this third response when our pets or children are the intended victims of predators, as occasionally happens when we venture into their territory or when, by destroying their habitats, we leave them no other survival option than to venture into our communities in search of prey. When it comes to our loved ones, we clearly give higher priority to preventing suffering and death than to respecting nature.

Thus, this third response to the predation *reductio* assigns a priority to the natural which is not confirmed by common moral practice. While this does not invalidate the argument, it does show that such an argument has a heavy burden of proof to meet before it poses a serious challenge to the predation *reductio*. It also suggests that this argument is disingenuous, as are so many other "it's only natural" references in moral discussions. When our interests or the interests of those we care for will be hurt, we do not recognize a moral obligation to "let nature take its course," but when we do not want to be bothered with an obligation, "that's just the way the world works" provides a handy excuse.

I shall now develop in turn each of the three response strategies noted at

the beginning of this paper. Each of these strategies provides an answer sufficient to defuse the predation *reductio*. The reason for taking time to deal with all three of them is that in addition to dealing with the predation issue, they provide opportunities for reflecting on general questions concerning the logic of moral reasoning. Each of these responses raises, and resolves in a different way, the question of the practical significance of the absurd in moral reasoning.

1. Would an obligation to prevent predation be absurd?

Conjuring up a picture of militant animal rightists fanning out across land and sea to protect mice from snakes and owls, rabbits from hawks and foxes, fish from bears and sharks, and otherwise making the world safe for the small and the herbivorous can easily make an obligation to prevent predation appear absurd. But appearances can be deceiving. What is commonly lost in the laugh of the predation *reductio* is that there are several different ways in which something can be absurd and that the legitimacy of the evaluation in (4) cannot be ascertained until we know just which of these forms of absurdity is being asserted.

When philosophers (perhaps, others, too) think of absurdity, the first thing that comes to mind is logical absurdity. However, that certainly cannot be the sense of the term that is being employed in (4). That humans should attempt to prevent predation is not in a class with attempting to square the circle, make two plus two equal five, or have a sentence be both true and false at the same time and place and in the same way. The classic form of the *reductio ad absurdum* argument requires that

the conclusion entailed by the hypothesis in question contradict some basic principle of reasoning, such as the laws of geometry, arithmetic, or logic. That humans ought to prevent predation does not violate any such law of reasoning and is, therefore, not logically absurd.

A more modern form of the *reductio* is the use of hypothetical-deductive reasoning to falsify scientific hypotheses. In this sort of *reductio*, the conclusion entailed by the hypothesis must be contrary to what is observed in fact. But (3) does not contain a factual claim, e.g., about the existence of a legal statute obligating us to prevent predation. Rather, (3) contains an imperative directing us to undertake such prevention. Since (3) does not contain a factual claim, it cannot be contrary to some matter of fact. Consequently, (3) is not "factually absurd," either.

Recent studies of the use of paradigms in science suggest yet another way in which a *reductio* may work. The proposed conclusion may contradict some thoroughly accepted theory, the principles of which seem much less questionable than the hypothesis from which the offending conclusion derives. Then, forced to choose between the thoroughly accepted theory and the more questionable hypothesis, we will feel justified in rejecting that hypothesis on the grounds that what it entails is "theoretically absurd." For example, if the conclusions of one's cosmological theorizing contradicted contemporary quantum mechanics, those conclusions would likely be considered unworthy of serious consideration and the bases for them be dismissed. This sort of absurdity is like logical absurdity, the difference being that here the principles contradicted may be substantive ones, whereas those contradicted in the first case were strictly formal principles.

In the case at hand, environmental ethicists who hold that "a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community, [and] it is wrong when it tends otherwise"³ would doubtless find an obligation to prevent predation to be theoretically absurd. However, such an evaluation could not be sustained, since the above environmental principle does not enjoy anything like the wide acceptance that the basis for an evaluation of theoretical absurdity must possess. Indeed, that environmental principle is so contrary to paradigm ethical principles, e.g., in giving intrinsic moral value to inanimate objects, that it is much likely to be the object of a theoretical *reductio* than the basis for one.

Of course, I shall not even try to provide a complete survey of other possible bases for labelling an obligation to prevent predation theoretically absurd. I shall just note that the humane principle in (1) is very widely accepted today, even if just what follows from that principle is still a matter of considerable controversy. Usually, it is not the obligation in (1) but interpretations of "avoidable" and "suffering" within that obligation and questions about whether there are rights correlated with this obligation which are at issue. Consequently, it is highly doubtful that there is any moral theory which is so much more thoroughly accepted than our obligation to alleviate avoidable animal suffering that it could serve as the basis for discrediting that humane obligation on the grounds that (3) contradicts that theory and is, therefore, theoretically absurd. Rather, if there is such a contrary theory, we would (initially, at least) be left in a condition of moral perplexity, with widely accepted principles entailing contrary obligations. So, even if (3) were to contradict the principles of some ethical theory, it would not follow that it could properly be characterized as

"theoretically absurd." Principles of humane morality are probably too widely accepted nowadays to permit a theoretical *reductio* of them.

Another way in which (3) might be absurd could be labelled "contextual absurdity." A conclusion is contextually absurd if it contradicts (the spirit of) one or more of its premises. It might be argued that what is absurd about (3) is that in attempting to prevent predation, we would cause much more suffering than we would prevent. Most obviously, we would have to frustrate predators and perhaps even drive many of them to extinction (in the wild). Furthermore, we would have to control the population explosion among the former prey which our prevention of predation would occasion. This would require frustrating many of these animals, too, and would probably necessitate subjecting some of them to the trauma of surgery to sterilize them.

As to just how bleak the indirect consequences of eliminating predation might be, I will not quibble, because this sort of objection is easily and reasonably met by reformulating (3) as follows:

(3') Therefore, humans would be obligated to prevent predation whenever doing so would not occasion as much or more suffering than it would prevent.

(3') does not represent a retreat from the moral stance being advocated in (1). (3') merely makes explicit how (3) must be interpreted, since (3) is to be a consequence of (1). (1) refers to *alleviating* animal suffering, and this would not be accomplished if preventing the suffering caused by predation caused animals even greater suffering. Hence, only if (3) is interpreted as (3') does it validly follow from (1) and (2).

It might be countered that while (3') meets the contextual objection, it does so by postulating a vacuous obligation, since there are no cases of predation which would fall under it. However, that is not true. (3') would immediately obligate us to prevent our pets from being predators. It would also obligate us to begin exploring other ways in which we could reduce the suffering caused by predation without occasioning as much or more suffering, e.g., in zoos, wildlife preserves, and other areas where we are already managing animals.

Thus, (3') contains a substantive obligation which is in the spirit of our obligation to alleviate avoidable animal suffering. Consequently, if contextual absurdity is the claim in (4), it is unwarranted, and we can make this immediately clear by substituting (3') for (3).

However, contextual absurdity does suggest yet another way in which (3') might be absurd: "practical absurdity." As Kant asserts, "ought implies can;" so, an obligation is practically absurd, if it commands us to do something we cannot do. Now, it really does seem inconceivable that we will ever be able to eliminate predation. Other than by eliminating carnivorous and omnivorous wildlife entirely, how are we to stop predators from catching rodents in the highland valleys of the Rockies and big fish from eating little fish in the ocean depths? Only God can see--and could prevent--each sparrow's fall.

Once again, this objection is not as serious as it appears to be. That a condition is one we cannot attain does not disqualify it from being a useful moral ideal. For example, Christian ethics instructs us to follow Christ's example, even though we can never be as good as Christ, since He was divine and we are not. Similarly, Kant asserts that the ultimate

obligation in morality is to become a holy will, which is something we can never do, since we are not purely rational beings but have a sensuous nature, as well. Kant makes this situation practical by interpreting that ultimate moral obligation as an obligation for us to strive to approximate ever more closely to the unattainable ideal of being holy.⁴

Such examples indicate that what is required of a practical moral ideal is not that it be attainable but merely that it be something we can work toward. As noted in the discussion of contextual absurdity, this is a condition that the obligation to prevent predation can meet. So, even if we cannot foresee ourselves being able to stop predation entirely, the obligation to prevent predation can still function as a moral ideal guiding what we can do. Consequently, it is not practically absurd.

This would seem to leave only the idea that (3') is absurd because it would direct humans to overstep their proper place in the world. It might be claimed that in even pursuing (3') as a moral ideal, we would be working toward attaining God-like control over nature, something which is not merely impractical but a false ideal for our moral endeavors.

Basically, this sort of objection is nothing more than purple prose. Appeals to what is "natural and proper" have been pressed as objections to virtually every moral innovation from the Emancipation Proclamation through women's suffrage to birth control. These past appeals to the naturally proper have proven to be nothing more than excuses for maintaining the *status quo* or for promoting personal preferences. There is no reason to believe that such appeals are anything but excuses in the discussion of our obligations to animals, either.

Working toward preventing predation would merely be an application of a common human activity which is not ordinarily regarded as unnatural or an expression of the sin of pride. We routinely interfere with nature to protect ourselves (and other animals, too) from such threats to life and limb as flooding rivers, diseases, erosion, storms, birth defects, infections, avalanches, pestilence, epidemics, and decay. Interfering with nature in an attempt to make the world a happier, more fulfilling, less dangerous place to live is a part of being human. Admittedly, we have not always pursued this project successfully or even wisely, but particular failures and stupidities do not demonstrate that the project itself is somehow unnatural, an offense against God, or an attempt by us to overstep "our assigned place" in the world (allowing, for the purposes of argument, that it even makes sense to use such a phrase).

Since this sort of objection is often expressed in at least superficially religious terms and probably makes sense only in a religious context, some sort of appeal to religious authority would seem to be the most likely way of trying to support it. However, if we turn to Judeo-Christian scripture, we find that God gave humans dominion over the earth and all that live upon it. No matter how one interprets "dominion," from absolute power to stewardship, it follows that God has, at the least, given us permission to manage nature. Furthermore, since this scripture also claims that God is a creator and that humans have been created in His image, it would seem to follow that in exercising our dominion over the earth, we can be expected to re-create it to some degree--and that re-creation is not limited by a commandment stating "Thou shalt not interfere with predation!" Judeo-Christian tradition thus does not support the

contention that it would be improper for us to attempt to prevent predation.

Of course, there are other scriptures besides the *Bible*, but it would certainly be out of place even to attempt to survey them here. We may simply note that if there are conflicting religious teachings on this issue, that fact, along with the notorious difficulties involved in trying to find rational grounds for choosing among competing religious traditions, is sufficient to blunt the force of this objection to our having an obligation to prevent predation. Consequently, it seems fair to conclude that the charge that (3') is "unnaturally absurd" either is merely rhetorical, does not fit with common practice and draws unwarranted conclusions from our past failures, or is unwarranted by the religious context needed to make it at all sensible. Whichever the option, when interpreted as a charge of unnatural absurdity, (4) is left unwarranted.

Thus, at the very least, it is not at all clear that the evaluation in (4) is warranted. Since a *reductio ad absurdum* argument relies on the absurdity of the proposed conclusion being blatant, it follows that the predation *reductio* of human obligations to animals fails.

Of the reasons just offered for this failure, perhaps the one with the greatest general import is that although something may be impractical as an immediate goal of our moral endeavors, that does not disqualify it from being a useful moral ideal guiding what we can accomplish. The spectre of gross impracticality seems to be what underlies the feeling that there is something absurd in the idea of humans being obligated to prevent predation. Recognizing that an unattainable condition may still serve as a useful guiding ideal for what is at-

tainable dispenses this spectre by giving practical import to the unattainable and showing that an obligation is not absurd just because it commands us to pursue what we cannot attain.

11. Would an obligation to prevent avoidable animal suffering entail an obligation to prevent predation?

Through the years, moral philosophers have agreed with Aristotle that ethics is "a practical science," but just what is involved in a science being a practical one is not well-established. A classical ideal, exemplified in Plato's *Republic* and Spinoza's *Ethics*, is that reason functions in fundamentally the same way in all areas, with only the subject matters and the conclusions being different, the conclusion of theoretical reasoning being knowledge, while the conclusion of practical reasoning is action. On the other hand, contemporary, non-cognitivist meta-ethical theories point toward fundamental differences in the operations of reason in practical and theoretical endeavours. I find the non-cognitivist analysis more credible than the classical ideal, and what I want to suggest here is that there is a rule for practical reasoning which renders one kind of *reductio* invalid in practical contexts, even though that kind of argument does not violate the general rules of logic. The effect of this rule will be to render a certain critical strategy fallacious in practical contexts, such as ethics.

This rule is suggested by a recent response to one of the standard criticisms of utilitarianism. That criticism of utilitarianism has taken the form of imagining some Brave New World which seems to fulfill the principle of utility but which is intuitively unacceptable. This is supposed to provide a *reductio* of utilitarianism. For example, environmental ethicists have criticized

utilitarianism on the grounds that if we were capable of replacing nature with a plastic environment which gave as much happiness as the natural one to all sentient beings involved (something we are not even near being able to do), then the principle of utility could not generate an obligation for us to favor the natural environment over the plastic one. A recent line of response to this sort of criticism has been to deny the relevance of such imaginative constructions by arguing that since utilitarianism is a moral philosophy for working with the problems of the world in which we actually live, it must be evaluated on the basis of how it instructs us to deal with real, not imaginary, problems and possibilities.⁵ Thus, this defense of utilitarianism undercuts a line of criticism by emphasizing the practicality of ethics, and this takes the form of confining the domain of inference from the principle of utility to matters of contemporary concern and possible response.

I find this defense of utilitarianism thoroughly appropriate, since I find science fiction and "worst conceivable case" criticisms of ethical principles to miss the point of doing ethics, a *practical* science, altogether. I want to suggest here a Kantian analogue to this defense of utilitarianism. What I propose is that "ought implies can" be interpreted as a rule for practical reasoning, and I offer the following as a formulation of that rule:

An argument of the form "P, Q, R, . . . Y /Therefore S ought to z" is valid only if "S can z" is true.⁶

Just how "can" is to be interpreted and just how we are to determine whether "S can z" is true, I shall leave at the intuitive level. Detailed responses to these issues would likely require different answers for different cases, e.g., cases involving specific

imperatives vs. those involving general imperatives, would also have to grapple with the issue of "can attain" vs. "can work toward," and, fortunately, are not necessary to deal with the issue at hand, the predation *reductio*.

In the previous section, we discussed several different kinds of *reductios*, differentiating them on the basis of the way in which the proposed conclusion is supposed to be absurd. The above rule for practical reasoning does not affect most of those kinds of *reductios*, but it does affect those of the form:

If P were true, S would be obligated to do something he/she cannot do, which is absurd.

According to the above rule, this practical *reductio* does not discredit P. Rather, the inference from P to "S ought to z" is invalid precisely because "S can z" is false. That is, in a practical science, i.e., one which (among other things) adopts the above rule of reasoning, the practical *reductio* is not an available line of criticism. This is because in a practical science, it is not the case that inferences to impractical obligations are valid but unsound, as they would have to be for a legitimate *reductio*. Rather, such inferences are simply invalid.⁷

Of course, this conclusion depends on the above rule (or something very much like it) being acceptable, and while having special rules of inference for limited domains of reasoning is unproblematic, it might be objected that a rule of reasoning which bases the validity of an inference on something being true confuses logical with factual issues. From the viewpoint of theoretical reasoning, such a criticism might be well-taken, but if one's concern is practical, then keeping

inferences in touch with the facts of the world is not confusion but reasonableness. Limiting our concern to real problems and possibilities is at least an important part of what it means to be "practical," and what the above rule for practical reasoning does is to make a logical contribution to specifying that practical attitude. Consequently, it would be a category mistake to criticize that rule for not employing the distinction between logical and factual issues employed in admittedly non-practical contexts.⁸

Returning to the predation *reductio*, the analysis of the previous section indicates that if (3') is absurd, it is because it contains an obligation we cannot fulfill. Consequently, if the predation *reductio* is to succeed, it must be as a practical *reductio*, rather than as a logical *reductio*, factual *reductio*, etc. But since this is an ethical issue, the rules of practical reasoning apply, including the prohibition against impractical inferences. Consequently, if (3') is impractical, (1) and (2) do not entail (3'). That is, if we cannot prevent predation, the above rule for practical reasoning tells us that our obligation to alleviate avoidable animal suffering cannot entail an obligation to prevent predation. Thus, the predation *reductio* is fallacious. The very thing that was supposed to render (3') absurd actually renders the inference from (1) and (2) to (3') invalid.

Of course, the analysis of the previous section indicates that an obligation to prevent predation would not be impractical, even though completely eliminating predation might be impossible. So, the above rule for practical reasoning may not be necessary to save our obligation to alleviate avoidable animal suffering from the predation *reductio*. Nonetheless, I think the analysis of this section is especially important, not only as a backstop, should some flaw be found in

our handling of practicality in the first section, but also because the practical rule of inference developed here expresses the proper role for practical absurdity in ethics. Impractical inferences do not discredit ethical principles; such inferences mark the boundaries of ethical concern. We shall develop this idea further in the next section.

III. If an obligation to alleviate avoidable animal suffering entailed an obligation to prevent predation and if the latter obligation would be absurd, would it follow that we are not obligated to alleviate avoidable animal suffering?

When we find that a hypothesis leads to an unacceptable conclusion, we need not simply infer that the hypothesis is also unacceptable. Rather, the conclusion may be used as a guide for discovering what is wrong with the hypothesis, how we should interpret the hypothesis, how we might revise the hypothesis, or what is and what is not covered by that hypothesis. If, in spite of the analyses of the previous sections, we accept (1) through (4) in the predation *reductio*, that argument falls under the last of these options. That is, rather than discrediting (1), the predation *reductio* helps show us what is and what is not covered by our obligation to alleviate avoidable animal suffering.

In the first section, we discovered that (4) is ambiguous and that the only substantive interpretation of it would be more clearly formulated as follows:

(4') That we ought to prevent predation would be an impractical obligation.

(4') clearly indicates that what is

(supposedly) absurd about the obligation in (3') is that it is beyond our power to fulfill that obligation. But if we cannot prevent predation, it follows that the suffering of animals who are preyed upon by other animals is not *avoidable* suffering and, therefore, is not covered by our obligation to alleviate avoidable animal suffering. Therefore, the conclusion to be drawn from (1) through (4') is not (5) but the following:

(5') Therefore, animal suffering due to predation is not included among the cases of animal suffering which humans are obligated to alleviate.

Saying that predation is unavoidable may strike some as being as simplistic and self-serving as saying that eating meat is necessary for human health and happiness. However, while predation that is avoidable, e.g., predation by our pets, may escape the argument of the preceding paragraph, it will not help salvage the predation *reductio*. Any predation that is avoidable in the sense at issue here, namely, "preventable by humans," is not something it would be practically absurd for us to be obligated to prevent. Therefore, predation covered by (1) is not covered by (4'). So, in every case, either the predation is not covered by (1), or it is not covered by (4'). Consequently, in no case can (1) through (4') justify (5).⁹

Of course, the point still remains that not all predation is unavoidable. But we now know the practical con-

clusion to be drawn from this:

Where we can prevent predation without occasioning as much or more suffering than we would prevent, we are obligated to do so by the principle that we are obligated to alleviate avoidable animal suffering. Where we cannot prevent predation or cannot do so without occasioning as much or more suffering than we would prevent, that principle does not obligate us to attempt to prevent predation.¹⁰

While that is the specific moral of this story, the general moral that runs through all three of the above analyses is that while a concern with practicality is certainly relevant in ethical disputations, exactly how the issue of practicality figures into ethical deliberations is not immediately obvious and is in need of careful reflection and clarification. Such clarification may involve carefully differentiating the ways in which different elements of our moral theories work, e.g., differentiating unattainable moral ideals from attainable moral goals, as was done in section I. Or it may involve recognizing that there are rules for practical reasoning not found in theoretical reasoning, such as the rule discussed in section II. Or it may involve clarifying ambiguities in key terms related to practicality, as was done with "avoidable" in section III. Whichever of these procedures is followed, the issue of practicality will be treated as a guide for moral concern, rather than as an occasion for ridiculing that concern.

Steve F. Sapontzis
California State University, Hayward

Notes

1. For an extended discussion of this point, see my "Moral Value and Reason," *The Monist* 66/1 (1983), pp. 146-159.

2. Critically discussing arguments concerning what is due the natural is made difficult by the strong, positive evaluative meaning of "natural" in its opposition to "artificial," "distorted," "disguised," "polluted," and other such terms. But, of course, to the degree that an argument trades on that evaluative meaning of the term, it begs the question of the respect due the "natural," in the sense of the term which is descriptive and refers to the native, instinctual, biological, unmanufactured, etc.

3. Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949), pp. 224-225.

4. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, Book II, Chapter II, Part IV.

5. R. M. Hare develops this sort of defense of utilitarianism in "Ethical Theory and Utilitarianism," in *Contemporary British Philosophy*, volume 4, ed. H. D. Lewis (London: Allen and Unwin, 1976).

6. I suspect that logically specifying "ought implies can" as a principle of practical reasoning would require elaborating a whole family of rules for practical reasoning. For example, in addition to the above inference rule, there must also be a selection rule like "'S ought to z' is a basic moral principle only if 'S can z' is true." Fortunately, it is not necessary to produce the entire family in order to deal with the predation *reductio*.

7. Since it is doubtful that a

practical reductio would be of any use in a non-practical context, it follows that the practical *reductio* is probably an altogether worthless form of criticism.

8. We may also note that basing the validity of inferences on factual considerations is not unheard of even in the theoretical sciences. The most obvious example of this is the "existential hypothesis" that "There exists at least one member of S" is true, which is required if the immediate inference from "All S are P" to "Some S are P" is to be valid. Perhaps Aristotle's presumption of the existential hypothesis is a testimony to his belief that even logic should be practical.

9. In line with the discussion of contextual absurdity in the first section, it might be argued that "avoidable" in (1) should be interpreted as "preventable by humans without occasioning equal or greater suffering." This interpretation would support the point being made here just as well as the shorter interpretation just discussed. Using the expanded interpretation of "avoidable" would require that we interpret (4) as follows:

(4'') That we ought to prevent predation would be an obligation to occasion as much or more suffering as we would prevent.

It follows that any case of predation covered by (1) would not be covered by (4'') and *vice versa*. So, (1) through (4'') could not support (5) any more than can (1) through (4').

10. Once such an obligation is acknowledged, further issues must be considered in determining how much and what sort of effort should be

devoted to fulfilling it. Among these issues is whether we will do more good by attempting to fulfill this obligation or by seeking to alleviate other forms of avoidable animal suffering. Other than by preventing predation by animals under our control, e.g., pets, it seems likely that for the foreseeable future, animal rights activists will do better by directing their

organized efforts on behalf of animals toward alleviating the suffering humans cause animals than by attempting to prevent predation among animals. Perhaps this question of where one can do the most good is the most substantive question concerning the practicality of an obligation to prevent predation.