Response: Autonomy as an Excuse for All-Too-Human Chauvinism

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In debating the question of animal liberation it has been my experience, if I may paraphrase Frey, that most people feel that (normal) human life is of a much higher quality than animal life and that since the value of life is a function of its quality, animal life does not have the same value as (normal) human life. Indeed, most people feel that we are something of a special or a privileged class against which the lives of others are viewed and their value assessed.¹

It is not surprising that we feel this way. As Donald Griffin has pointed out, "it seems plausible that animals would be more likely to survive and reproduce if their beliefs included confident faith in their own superiority and the assurance that exploiting other species was normal and correct behavior."² Historically, religion, literature, and philosophy have been extensively engaged in reinforcing this instinctual faith in the pre-eminent worth and privilege of humanity. It has been their task to find and warmly extol those things which distinguish us from those "mere animals" we want to drive off the land, kill, eat, wear, and otherwise exploit and destroy to fulfill our needs and wants. It has been their job to keep our consciences clear as we bstride the world, using our overwhelming might to take control, mold the world to satisfy our idea of the good life, and kill off those who stand in our way. *Self-fulfillment*, accomplishing *our* plans, achieving *our*

purposes—again to use Frey's language and emphasis—that is what we want, and many philosophers have bravely stepped forward to reassure us that since the quality and value of (normal) human life are "incomparably beyond" those of any mere animal, "the way is open" for us to kill these inferior life forms as we need and want to in pursuit of the wonderfully "rich, full life" of a (normal) human being.³

Autonomy is something we humans have frequently felt we were unique in possessing, and our philosophers have repeatedly reminded us how pre-eminently worthy being autonomous makes us. According to Frey, autonomy gives a "further dimension of value to our lives" by adding the happiness of a "strong sense of achievement" to what would otherwise be a "mere record of the satisfaction of first-order desires and appetites."⁴ Frey thus gives a hedonistic reason for believing that autonomous beings are more valuable than nonautonomous beings. One could also (or alternatively) offer deontological and altruistic reasons for that evaluation: Kantians claim that only autonomous agents are capable of recognizing and acting out of respect for the moral law, and utilitarians could argue that only autonomous agents are capable of escaping the repetitive cycles of nature to improve the general welfare. Such reasons raise a myriad of questions, including the one with which Professor Comstock has dealt: Does autonomy, as Frey has characterized it, have the "crucial moral significance"⁵ he attributes to it? I have three contributions I would like to make to that line of questioning.

First, Bentham noted seven dimensions of hedonistic values: intensity, duration, certainty, propinquity, fecundity, purity, and extent.⁶ Like John Stuart Mill, in chapter II of *Utilitarianism*, Frey wants to add an eighth dimension, quality, to this list. However, he does not—in his writings with which I am familiar—explain how this eighth dimension relates to the other seven. Would he have it, as Mill did, that the accomplishment of even one little reflective project is preferable to even the greatest fulfillment of unreflective desires and appetites? For example, would Frey maintain that the sense of achievement at completing one's plans to clean out the rain gutters is preferable to any amount of pleasure from sex, fine wine, good food, or other sensual sources? If so, he has a heavy burden of justification to shoulder in order to render such an incredible conclusion credible. But if not, then there may be autonomous lives that are not as valuable as nonautonomous lives filled with

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reliable, ready-to-hand, pure, intense, enduring, fecund, or extensive happiness. Thus, Frey must either embrace some incredible comparisons or concede that a sense of achievement need not make a life something of immensely greater value than a life of satisfied desires and appetites.

Second, dedicated empiricist that he was, Mill held that the only way to tell whether X is qualitatively superior to Y is to ask someone who has experienced both which she prefers. But no one can experience both an autonomous and a nonautonomous life. Consequently, unless a credible, nonexperiential way of assessing the quality of life can be found, the question of whether an autonomous or nonautonomous life is of greater quality and value is unanswerable and, many would conclude, therefore cognitively meaningless.

Sometimes the meaninglessness of comparing the quality of autonomous and nonautonomous lives goes unrecognized because a nonautonomous life, i.e., the life of a being lacking the capacity for autonomy, is confused with a life in which a being capable of autonomy is not able to actualize that potentiality. For instance, a person who spends part of her life dominated by strong-willed parents but who eventually goes on to hold her own values and way of life may report that she prefers the latter, self-determined way of life. And this may be cited as evidence that an autonomous life is preferable to a nonautonomous life. But that would be a category mistake: In discussions of human vs. nonhuman lives, the contrast between autonomy and nonautonomy refers to differing capacities, whereas the alternatives in the case of the liberated woman refer to different actualizations of the same capacities. Therefore, what a human being can report on, namely, the undesirability of a life in which her capacities for autonomy go unfulfilled, is irrelevant to determining whether an autonomous, human life is preferable to a nonautonomous, animal life, since the latter is a life led by a being who is incapable of autonomy and, consequently, can have all his capabilities fulfilled in a nonautonomous life.

Let me pursue this crucial point a bit further, with an eye to the origin of values. When something is said to have value, it is always meaningful to ask, "For whom?" So, for whom is the value of an autonomous life greater than that of a nonautonomous life? Frey's answer is, apparently, for some moral philosophers, especially some Anglo-American moral philosophers. Now, this evaluation, if arrived at reflectively at all,

must have been arrived at by these people either (1) imagining how it would feel to live the life of a dog, a chicken, or some other nonautonomous being (the dog and chicken are Frey's candidates for nonautonomy⁷) or (2) contemplating these nonautonomous lives the way one would a tree, painting, or other object and noting the properties those lives have when thus externally examined.

If the evaluation is based on how these philosophers imagine *they* would feel if *they* had to live a dog's life, then these philosophers are employing their imaginations to commit the same sort of category mistake discussed above. The image one has here is that of a prisoner, a consciousness which is capable of doing a variety of things confined to a way of life which does not permit her to actualize those capacities, although she remains aware of these capacities and feels frustrated by the lack of opportunity to actualize them. However touching, this image has nothing to do with the actual, lived quality and value of the life of a dog. The actual, lived quality and value of a way of life must (logically) be the quality and value that way of life was for the individual actually living it. Consequently, if we hold, as seems reasonable, that the quality and value of a way of life depend on how it fulfills or frustrates capabilities, we must remember that the relevant capabilities are those of the individual actually living the life. For example, it is how a dog's way of life actually fulfills or frustrates the dog's capacities, not how it would fulfill or frustrate the capacities of some Anglo-American philosopher, that contributes to its actual, lived quality and value.

It follows that to determine whether a human life actually has higher lived quality and value than a dog's, one must compare the quality and value the human life has for its human subject with the quality and value the dog's life has *for its canine subject*. Colloquially, in order to determine whether the happiness of a happy human life is of a quality superior to the happiness of a happy canine life, we would need to compare the happiness our way of life provides us with the happiness the dog's way of life *provides the dog*. In order to make that comparison, we would have to feel the happiness the dog derives from his life and compare that with the happiness we derive from ours. Since we are not dogs, we cannot do that. Although we can tell, from his behavior, that a dog is happy, we cannot feel the happiness of a happy dog and, consequently, cannot compare its quality to that of the happiness we

experience. For example, since we cannot feel the dog's excitement at running along the beach, we cannot compare the quality of his happiness to the quality of our sense of fulfillment at solving a tricky logic problem and determine which is the qualitatively superior happiness. Consequently, we cannot tell whether a fulfilling life for a dog is qualitatively less happy than a fulfilling life for a human. Thus, assertions that a human life possesses superior actual, lived quality and value must (logically) be merely confused, rhetorical flourishes, devoid of cognitive content.⁸

But it may not be actual, lived quality and value that Frey and his fellow anthropophiles have in mind. When they assert that autonomous life has a higher quality and value than nonautonomous life, they may mean merely that it has a preponderance of the qualities they prefer. The situation would be like that of someone who holds that the music of Beethoven is qualitatively superior to that of the Beatles: the valuer has certain qualities he prefers in music, and he finds more of them in *Fidelio* than in *The Yellow Submarine*. On this interpretation, when Frey's Anglo-American philosophers hold that autonomous life is qualitatively superior to nonautonomous life, this is to be understood as asserting that these philosophers have certain qualities they prefer in a way of life, and they find more of them in autonomous than in nonautonomous ways of life.

Now, we philosophers have long believed that we are "the measure of all things," smugly certain that "the unexamined life is not worth living" and that Socrates and his acolytes through the centuries have most closely approached the ideal human life and, consequently, the ideal of all life. Nevertheless, the conceit of holding that "the way is open" to killing others because their way of life does not possess the qualities preferred by a group of moral (!) philosophers is particularly appalling. As Comstock has shown, and Christ, Rousseau, Kierkegaard, Faulkner, and many others confirm, Frey's preferences are not shared by all normal, adult humans, nor even by all humans who have reflected sensitively on the human condition. They are doubtless not shared by nonautonomous beings. Given this diversity of preferences, it would seem incumbent on Frey—especially since he wants to make the qualities he prefers into life-or-death criteria—to demonstrate that his preferences are the "true," "basic," "superior," or otherwise definitive criteria for evaluating the quality and value of life. I am not aware that he has even attempted to do this.

Based on the discussions of moral relativism I have published elsewhere,⁹ I would argue that such a demonstration cannot be provided. Since values depend on valuers for their existence and since valuers are so diverse, there is no nonarbitrary way of showing that what one group of valuers prefers in life provides the "true," "basic," "superior," or otherwise definitive evaluation of lives. Nonarbitrary comparisons of the quality and value of ways of life are limited to evaluating alternative ways of life *for the same (sort of) subject*, as when we determine that life in a battery cage is less fulfilling for chickens than a free-roaming life or that spontaneous, intuitive lives are less fulfilling for Anglo-American philosophers than are self-controlled, reflective lives.

Finally, at one point Frey does go beyond warmly reciting his preferences to offering us one reason why autonomy is of "crucial moral significance in killing:" An autonomous being is "able to see itself as existing over time, able to have desires with respect to the future, including the desire to go on living, and able, therefore, to have these desires frustrated."¹⁰ Apparently, Frey intends "crucial moral significance" here to mean something like "necessary condition for making killing morally significant," since he concludes that "the way is open" to killing those who lack the ability to have such desires and to experience such frustration.

Since I have refuted this sort of contention at length elsewhere,¹¹ let me here just quickly mention one serious, logical problem with it. The difficulty is that even if frustrating plans for the future and a desire to live are morally significant matters, it does not follow that depriving a nonautonomous being of the rest of its life, thereby depriving it of any chance at further happiness, is not also a morally significant matter. Therefore, it does not follow that "the way is open" to killing nonautonomous beings.

This may be overlooked, since using the word "frustrated" suggests that killing autonomous beings is morally crucial because they experience *feelings* of frustration at having the fulfillment of their desires blocked by being killed. Nonautonomous beings, supposedly lacking plans for the future, could not experience such feelings of frustration at being killed. However, such an analysis of the moral significance of killing would open the way to killing autonomous beings in ways which do not cause them feelings of frustration, e.g., killing them in their sleep. Since that

is, presumably, an unacceptable conclusion, the moral significance of killing autonomous beings must lie in the blocking of the fulfillment of their desires, whether or not they realize those desires are being blocked. This suggests that there is not a morally crucial difference between killing a being with desires for the future and killing a being lacking such desires.

In conclusion, I would like to comment on the idea that because there is a "further dimension of value to our lives,"¹² "the way is open to the killing of animals." It is not obvious that A's being superior to B entitles A to kill or otherwise exploit B. The teachings of Christ and the extra burdens placed on the philosopher-kings of Plato's *Republic* suggest the contrary. Consequently, "firmly resisting any egalitarianism over the value of life"¹³ should (logically) not be confused with opening the way to killing or otherwise exploiting animals. Justifying that opening requires not only demonstrating superiority, which Frey has tried but failed to do; it also requires demonstrating that superiority provides a license to exploit and kill, which Frey has had the good sense not even to try to do.

Notes

¹ This paraphrase is of R. G. Frey, "Autonomy and the Value of Animal Life," *The Monist* 70/1 (1987), pp. 50-51.

² Donald R. Griffin, *The Question of Animal Awareness* (New York: Rockefeller University Press, 1981), p. 88.

³ Frey, pp. 51, 54.

⁴ Frey, p. 56.

⁵ Frey, p. 51.

⁶ Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, chapter IV.

⁷ Frey, p. 54.

⁸ The same conclusion holds, for the same reason, concerning assertions that a happy human life will be quantitatively superior to a happy canine life.

⁹ See S. F. Sapontzis, "Moral Relativism: A Causal Interpretation and Defense," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 24/4 (1987), and "Groundwork for a Subjective Theory of Ethics," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 27/1 (1990).

¹⁰ Frey, p. 51.

¹¹ See S. F. Sapontzis, "Must we Value Life to Have a Right to It?," *Ethics and Animals* 3/1 (1982), and *Morals, Reason, and Animals* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), chapter 9.

¹² Frey, p. 56.

¹³ Frey, p. 56.