

Is it Bad to Kill Animals?

I. The duty to eat our friends

In his essay, "Eating our Friends," Roger Scruton argues that we may agree that the current system of industrial animal agriculture is morally problematic because of the pain and suffering it causes to non-human animals. However, he suggests that we are not only allowed to eat meat, raised humanely, but may even have a duty to do so.

In support of his claim that we are morally permitted to eat animals that are raised and killed humanely, he claims that for cattle:

To be killed at 30 months is not intrinsically more tragic than to be killed at 40, or 50, or 60. And if the meat is at its best after 30 months, and if every month thereafter represents an economic loss, who will blame the farmer for choosing so early a death? In doing so he merely reflects the choice of the consumer, upon whose desires the whole trade in meat, and therefore the very existence of his animals, depends. (392-3)

But he goes beyond this to argue that humane animal husbandry is "a complex moral good." (393) Animal farming is "one of the kindest uses of land yet devised," and "

...the result of raising animals [traditionally, humanely] will change the character of meat-eating, which will become not only more expensive, but more ceremonial... The animal brought to the table will have enjoyed the friendship and protection of the one who nurtured him, and his death will be like the ritual sacrifices described in the Bible and Homeric literature – a *singling out* of a victim for an important office to which a kind of honor is attached. Such it seems to me would be the life of the virtuous carnivore, the one who is prepared to eat only his friends. (393)

He goes on to suggest that virtuous carnivorousness will be more effective in changing farming practices than vegetarianism. "...I would suggest not only that it is permissible for those who care about animals to eat meat; they have a duty to do so." (394) Why? Conscientious carnivores can exert more pressure on those engaged in meat production to do so only through humane practices.

II. The Surprising Claim:

Elizabeth Harman argues against "The Surprising Claim" (396):

- (a) We have strong reasons not to cause intense pain to animals: the fact that an action would cause intense pain to an animal makes the action wrong unless it is justified by other considerations; and
- (b) We do not have strong reasons not to kill animals: it is not the case that killing an animal is wrong unless it is justified by other considerations.

[Note that in Harman, 'animals' sometimes seems to mean *non-human animals*, and sometimes *animals* generally.]

A. Argument against the Surprising Claim (397):

1. If it is true that we have strong moral reasons against causing intense pain to animals, such that doing so is impermissible unless justified by other considerations, then part of the explanation of this truth is that animals have moral status.
2. If it is true that we have strong moral reasons against causing intense pain to animals, such that doing so is impermissible unless justified by other considerations, then part of the explanation of this truth is that significantly harming something with moral status is impermissible unless justified by other considerations.
3. If an action painlessly kills a healthy animal in the prime of life, then that action significantly harms the animal.

4. If it is true that we have strong moral reasons against causing pain to animals, such that doing so is impermissible unless justified other considerations then painlessly killing a healthy animal in the prime of life is impermissible unless justified by other considerations (1,2,3).

5. Therefore, the Surprising Claim is false (4).

Response 1 (728): Death is bad for an animal. But it doesn't harm an animal to kill it (painlessly) after a life in which the animal is well cared for, because one does not harm someone by depriving him/her/it of something good.

- What is it to harm something? Note the difference between harming and failing to benefit.
- Is harming something just a matter of causing that thing bad experiences?
- "Actively and physically interfering with [an animal] in such a way that [it] is deprived of a benefit does typically harm that [animal]. (398)
- When is the animal harmed, if painlessly caused to die?

Response 2 (398):

- (i) The death of a person is bad for her only because it frustrates her desires and plans for the future.
- (ii) Therefore, death is bad in general only because it frustrates desires and plans.
- (iii) Animals do not have desires and plans for the future.
- (iv) Therefore, animals' deaths are not bad for them.

Problem: (i) is false because someone's future may be good for him/her/it, even if he/she/it doesn't have plans and desires for it. (398-9)

Response 3 (399):

It is true that animal pain matters morally. But it is a mistake to conclude that this is because *animals* have moral status. Rather, animals lack moral status. But *stages* of animals have moral status. Animal pain matters morally because an animal stage is in pain. What is better or worse for the *animal* does not matter morally, though what is better or worse for stages of it does.

- This view is implausible. When we perform painful surgery on an animal, we cause discomfort to stages of the animal for the sake of the whole. This is what justifies the surgery. We are not permitted to cause pain to one morally significant being for the sake of others. But we *are* justified in causing pain to one stage of an individual for the sake of *her* long term good.

Response 4 (401): McMahon's "Time Relative Interests View"

We have strong reasons against causing animal pain, and we have some reasons against painlessly killing animals in the prime of life, but these reasons are weakened by animals' lack of deep psychological continuity over time. On this view, we may have weak reasons not to kill animals, but not strong ones.

Problem: the fact that non-human animals have a weak connect to their futures does not show that they don't have an interest in a long and healthy future. Consider the examples of Billy and Tommy: we should perform surgery on animals – even painful surgery – that will enable them to live a longer healthy life. Why would this be the case if killing them now is permissible and doesn't harm them?

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Spring 2017

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