CHAPTER 8: ACTIVISM FOR ANIMALS

Overview

What, if any, kinds of actions done to try to improve the treatment of animals (including, perhaps, trying to eliminate various uses of animals) are morally permissible? Which, if any, are morally obligatory? Changing our diets? Educating others? Working for larger cages and more humane treatment, or for the abolishment of (some) animal use industries, or both? Trying to change the laws to better protect animals? Illegal actions (done covertly or openly)? Undercover investigations to reveal animal abuse? Rescuing or releasing animals from animal use industries? Exposing people and businesses who support harmful animal use? Violence of any kind, ever? Threats of violence? Terrorism? We will explore a range of tactics and attempt to evaluate them morally.

Readings

EMPTY CAGES – PART V – MANY HANDS ON MANY OARS
EMPTY CAGES – 11. "Yes . . . but . . ."
EMPTY CAGES – EPILOGUE – The Cat

ANIMAL LIBERATION – 6. Speciesism Today . . . defenses, rationalizations, and objections to Animal Liberation and the progress made in overcoming them Also re-read the 2002 Preface to Animal Liberation.

ANIMALS LIKE US – Ch. 10. Animal Rights Activism
ANIMALS LIKE US – Ch. 11. What Goes Around Comes Around

Gruen: 7. Protecting animals. (optional)

Matt Ball, Vegan Outreach, “Working in Defense of Animals”
http://www.veganoutreach.org/enewsletter/20030105.html
Vegan Outreach “Adopt a College” Program:
http://www.veganhealth.org/colleges/

Bruce Friedrich (PETA), “Effective Advocacy: Stealing from the Corporate Playbook”
http://www.goveg.com/effectiveAdvocacy.asp

Karen Dawn, about Dawnwatch:
http://dawnwatch.com/introduction.htm

James LaVeck (Tribe of Heart film production company),
“Invasion of the Movement Snatchers: A Social Justice Cause Falls Prey to the Doctrine of “Necessary Evil”
http://www.tribeofheart.org/toohtml/essay_ims.htm (see his other essays as well)
Gary Francione, “The Abolition of Animal Exploitation: The Journey Will Not Begin While We Are Walking Backwards,”
http://www.abolitionist-online.com/article-issue05_gary.francione_abolition.of.animal.exploitation.2006.shtml

The Center for Consumer Freedom: http://www.activistcash.com/
& http://www.consumerfreedom.com/
SourceWatch on the Activist Cash page
http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=A_visit_to_the_ACTIVISTCash.com_web_site and the Center for Consumer Freedom:

Wikipedia entry on the Animal Liberation Front:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Animal_Liberation_Front

Recommended Reading:

- Peter Singer, ed. In Defense of Animals: The Second Wave (Blackwell)
Criticisms or Complaints about (Some) Activists Have No Implications for the Morality of Animal Use

Activists try to bring about change in others’ beliefs, attitudes and behavior. Naturally, since people tend to be resistant to change, people often do not like activists. This dislike sometimes leads to bad arguments.

When people are unhappy with activists and what they do, they sometimes seem to think that this has some bearing on the morality of the actions that that the activist is concerned with. For example, you might hear someone say something like, “It’s OK to eat meat. After all, vegetarians are so pushy and self-righteous and ‘in your face’ about it all.” Or, “Animal research is clearly a good thing. After all, animal rights activists are so obnoxious in their protests and some of them even break the law and try to intimidate scientists.” Activists – for animals and many other issues – often get called a lot of bad names and are thought poorly of.

These responses, while unfortunately common, are extremely poor, if they are given to try to show that some use of animals is, contrary to what the activist argues, morally permissible. This is because no moral evaluation of actions follows from evaluations about people. Think about the abortion controversy. Suppose someone said, “Some anti-abortionists threaten and even murder abortion providers; these activists are bad people.” If they then said, “Therefore, we should think that abortion is morally OK,” the conclusion simply doesn’t follow. And it never follows elsewhere: whether an action is morally permissible or not is not determined by any activists’ behavior, good or bad. The issues are separate and logically distinct.

“Smear campaigns” against activists are also typically based on false generalizations about activists. Yes, some animal activists are rude, obnoxious or whatever, but surely some animal use advocates are also rude, obnoxious or whatever. And some animal advocates are also quite nice, friendly and respectful, as are some advocates of animal use (at least to human beings). But we must keep in mind that none of this has any bearing on the moral status of any animal use.
“Welfarism” & “Welfarists” versus “Animal Rights” & “Abolitionists”: Ends and Means

A current heated controversy among animal advocates is whether they should be – as some describe it – either advocates of “animal welfare” and “welfare reforms,” or advocates for “animal rights” and the “abolition” of harmful animal use or both. These terms are often ill-defined and not carefully thought through. This can lead to needless conflict among animal advocates and an inability to understand what kind of information might help resolve these debates. Thinking about “ends” or “goals” and “means” or “strategies” can help us understand these distinctions and better assess (and perhaps overcome) this debate amongst activists.

First, ends: what would be a morally acceptable end goal for the treatment of animals? What kind of world would we have if all animals were treated in morally permissible ways, where we could say, “We have achieved the moral goal for how animals ought to be treated since none are treated wrongly anymore?”

Regan’s cat case presents two broad options – among many – for such a goal:

C. Seriously harming animals is permissible provided they are housed in comfortable cages, treated gently and killed painlessly.

D. Seriously harming animals is typically morally wrong, even if they are housed in comfortable cages, treated gently and killed painlessly.

Anyone who claims (C) is an acceptable goal or end we can call a “welfarist”: they believe that once certain kinds of harms to animals are minimized or eliminated, it is still usually morally permissible to seriously harm animals, e.g., by killing them. Their view might vary depending on the purposes behind these harms, of course. And there are important details, e.g., about which harms are permissible to cause and which aren’t, that they would need to explain so we fully understand the view. And, most importantly, whether any arguments in favor of welfarism are sound and withstand objections is something we would want to think about
very carefully.\(^1\)

Anyone who believes that (C) is deficient for an ideal goal and that (D) is that ideal we might call a “genuine” animal rights advocate. Or, so that we say what we really mean, we could just say they believe that *seriously harming animals is typically morally wrong, even if they are housed in comfortable cages, treated gently and killed painlessly*. We would want to understand their reasons for why they think that, and whether any arguments in favor of this kind of view are sound and withstand critical scrutiny is something we would also want to think about very carefully.

Beyond the question of acceptable or ideal final goals or ends for animals is the question of “means”: what sort of actions, policies, strategies, campaigns, and other activist activities will be the most effective means toward the desired end goal for animals? In particular, if the goal is (D), the “animal rights” end, what should be done now to best achieve this, or get us closest to it, as soon as possible?

Here is where the debate begins. Should we now campaign for larger cages, and, once successful with that, then campaign for “no cages” – i.e., argue that animals shouldn’t be used in the first place? (Or should some activists do the former and other activists the latter?) The former might lead to some small improvements now (or it might not), but it also might forestall or prevent greater improvements that might have occurred had the focus been on “empty cages.” On the other hand, campaigns for “empty cages” might fall on too many deaf ears and yield no short term

\(^1\) Some might observe that, in practice, those who call themselves “welfarists” or “advocates of animal welfare” typically accept just about any use of animals, i.e., they deem just about all harmful uses of animals as “necessary” and/or respecting “animal welfare.” This may be true, but it doesn’t show that welfarism is false. This may, however, suggest that there really is no clearly defined view “welfarism”: it’s just some words that people use but the view really has no implications for animal use because we can’t pin it down in any rigorous way. See Gary Francione’s writings for discussion (Google).
improvements. But perhaps enough ears eventually will hear the message and this will result in widespread *abolition* of animal use, perhaps incrementally, one industry or sub-industry after another. Or maybe not.

These debates are often divisive, but it’s not clear that they should be. For one, they often involve matters that are largely speculative, such as the long-term effects of some campaign strategy (as compared to another). Here we are dealing with little knowledge and hard data; we are often left with guesswork, hopes and under-informed estimations. This ignorance should result in greater humility and less dogmatism on this topic, and a call for *formal* training in areas that might bring in some useful information to help us answer these questions about means, such as economics, marketing, consumer psychology, statistics and so forth. We should agree that we don’t know what we need to know to bring about our desired end, and turn our focus towards gaining that knowledge.

A second reason why these debates shouldn’t be divisive is that it is not clear that they are philosophical ones. As suggested above, they are largely empirical and scientific. Our ends do not obviously dictate our means. Suppose we lived a few hundred years ago, came to believe that slavery was wrong and should be abolished, not merely made more “humane.” We have set our *ends*, but what *means* should we use to achieve that end ASAP? Back then, there was no obvious answer, for reasons comparable to those mentioned about. These issues were debated then (and are still debated now, since human slavery still exists) and animal advocates can surely learn from studying that debate.

**Animal Advocates Promoting Animal Use?**

As a concrete example of the issue above, some animal advocacy organizations have recently begun giving a “platform” for animal-use industries, especially those who practice so-called “humane” farming. Whether this is an effective (or dismal) strategic means to help bring about an “animal rights” end, or whether this should be seen as a statement that the morally acceptable end really is “welfarism” is something that many activists have begun debating.
Illegal Actions

Let us now turn to some more controversial forms of activism. Consider “open rescues” of animals from farms: these typically involve trespass, breaking and entering, and theft of animals that are somebody’s property. All these actions are illegal. Some people argue that such rescues are morally wrong because they are illegal. They might argue similarly against any form of activism that involves illegal activity.

These are unsound arguments and nearly everyone agrees with that because nearly everyone believes that this unstated premise, which is essential to the argument, is false:

Necessarily, if an action is illegal, then it is morally impermissible.

Hiding Jews from Nazi’s was illegal, yet morally permissible; helping slaves escape to freedom was illegal, yet morally permissible. Many more examples make the same point. Contrary to a common reaction, these examples do not make any “comparisons” whatsoever between animal issues and slavery or human holocausts\(^1\); they are simply used to show that any (or just about any) argument against some kind of activism based on the premise that it is illegal is unsound (or, at least, just about everyone’s beliefs entail that it is unsound, since they think the above premise is false: just because something is illegal does not necessarily entail that it is morally wrong). Animal advocates are advised to read Martin Luther King, Jr.’s 1963 “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.”\(^2\) They will find much to resonate with Dr. King’s discussion.

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\(^1\) For an insightful discussion of such comparisons, see Karen Davis’s *The Holocaust and the Henmaid’s Tale: A Case for Comparing Atrocities* (Lantern, 2005). [http://www.upc-online.org/](http://www.upc-online.org/)

\(^2\) Widely reposted online; [http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/frequentdocs/birmingham.pdf](http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/frequentdocs/birmingham.pdf)
** Violent Actions

More controversial forms of activism involve violence or threats of violence of different kinds. Violence comes in many different forms, as our authors observe.

Some animal advocates, e.g., some members of the ALF (Animal Liberation Front), engage in property destruction (e.g., of animal cages, computers with experimental data, etc.) and even sometimes even arson. Although they claim that their actions are “non-violent,” this strains the concept of violence. They argue that since they are not violent to anyone, i.e., they do not inflict bodily harm on anyone, they thereby act non-violently.

This inference does not follow: one can act violently yet do no violence to anyone. For example, it seems to make perfect sense to say that someone could violently smash carton of fruits and vegetables with a sledgehammer, especially if the person was in a heated frenzy. One might not want young children to see such a spectacle because, well, it’s too violent! So the ALF’s insistence that they are always non-violent strains the meaning of the term. Perhaps they (and animal use industries) want to insist that they are non-violent because they think this principle is true:

All acts of violence are morally impermissible.

If this were true, and they acted violently (in performing arson, or in how they treat animals, for example), that would imply that they were acting wrongly.

But the above principle is false, according to most people: violence can be, and often is, morally justified. If violence (or threats of violence) are needed for self-defense, then it’s permissible. If it’s needed to defend an innocent third party, then it’s justified. Perhaps some wars can be justified. So the above principle is false, according to most people.

Most people might even think that it’s false regarding some animals too: if someone tried to attack your dog or cat, might you be morally justified in responding with violence, or threats of violence, to defend your companion animal if needed? What if the animal was a stray? What if the animal was in a farm,
slaughterhouse or lab? If they knew the details of the case, perhaps many people might think that violence, if needed for defending animals, would be morally permissible in at least some of these cases.

So perhaps violence could be justified in cases of rescue. Whether violence can ever be justified for any other purposes, e.g., in an attempt to change society’s general views about our obligations to animals, seems extremely doubtful. In fact, given all the relevant considerations, it is likely that any such violence, including possible genuine “terrorism,” would be deeply morally wrong, for reasons that Regan, Singer and Rowlands articulate.

Discussion Questions

1. For many ethical issues, a good place to start is to reflect on “common views” about the issues. Suppose you surveyed a range of people and asked them what kinds of animal advocacy (if any) is good, effective and/or acceptable, and what kinds (if any) are bad, ineffective and/or unacceptable. What are some of the most common answers that would be given? What reasons would you often hear in favor of these answers? Are these reasons generally good reasons or not? Why?
2. Describe the range of options for activism for animals. Explain which you think are most effective or useful (for what?), the least effective or useful (for what?) and why.
3. Obviously, animal use industries are critical of animal activists. Describe their responses to activists, their “counter-activism” and your moral evaluation of their tactics.
4. Is any illegal activity (e.g., “open-rescues”) for animals ever moral justified? When and why, or why not? Is violence, of any kind, ever morally justified? When and why, or why not?
5. What kind of activism, if any, should you personally be engaged in? Is this a moral obligation? Why should you do this kind activism rather than another? Justify your choices with reasons.
Of course, always feel free to raise any other questions, observations, criticisms and any other responses to the Chapter’s readings and issues.

**Paper option**

A paper on activism: what kinds of activism (if any) are permissible? What (if any) are obligatory? What (if any) are wrong?
RECOMMENDED FURTHER READING:

Overviews of Animals & Ethics

1. Susan Armstrong & Richard Botzler, eds. *The Animal Ethics Reader*, 2nd Ed. (Routledge, 2003, 2008) is the only comprehensive anthology of ethics & animals writings currently available. It is less than ideal, however, because the pro-animal theoretical selections are perhaps not ideal (e.g., the selections from Singer and Regan are not the best available; the selections from other pro-animal ethical theoreticians are a bit idiosyncratic); there are few criticisms of pro-animal moral theorizing, little anti-animal ethical theorizing, and few defenses of particular animal uses; furthermore, the selection on animal experimentation is sparse. The strengths seem to be in the areas of wildlife and environmental issues, as those seem to be the editors’ specialties.


3. Tom Regan and Peter Singer, eds., *Animal Rights and Human Obligations*, 2nd ed. (Prentice Hall, 1989). An excellent collection, despite its age, but is very expensive ($75 new, but much cheaper used).

book is written in a personal style, with many anecdotes about his experiences.


6. Clare Palmer, “Animals in Anglo-American Philosophy”
http://www.h-net.org/~animal/ruminations_palmer.html


http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-animal/

On argument analysis


www.MakingMoralProgress.com (in progress)

On ethics


On Animal Minds / Cognitive Ethology

http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/consciousness-animal/

http://www.pleasurablekingdom.com/

14. Marc Bekoff’s web page and books:
http://literati.net/Bekoff/