CHAPTER 4: OBJECTIONS TO DEFENSES OF ANIMALS AND DEFENDING ANIMAL USE

Overview

This Chapter we will survey the most influential general moral theories that have been appealed to argue in defense of animal use and/or to object to the theories developed in defense of animals. As we will see, these theories are often extensions or developments of the moral theories that have been developed to explain how humans ought to treat other human beings. These writers often argue that the moral theory (or theories) that best explain the nature and extent of our moral obligations to human beings (especially vulnerable ones, such as babies, children, the mentally challenged, the elderly, and so on) do not have positive implications for animals. Thus, they argue that there are relevant differences between the kinds of cases that justify protecting all human beings but allowing serious harms to animals.

Readings

EMPTY CAGES – 4. Animal Rights (pp. 62-74)

ANIMAL LIBERATION – 5. Man’s Dominion . . . a short history of speciesism (See especially the discussion of Aquinas, Descartes, Kant and thinkers discussed in The Enlightenment and After)


Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s1HOtggYuMQ

debate.pdf

Video: Carl Cohen, "Why Animals Do Not Have Rights": at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kbk7xY9t-UQ


ANIMAL LIBERATION – 1. All Animals Are Equal – review the objections that Singer discusses

ANIMALS LIKE US – Ch. 2. The Moral Club – review the objections that Rowlands discusses
General Theories and Particular Cases

Like the last Chapter, we want to try to focus on these theories in themselves and their implications for animals “in general,” without so much focus on what they imply for particular uses of animals, e.g., for food, fashion experimentation, entertainment, and other purposes. This will likely be harder than the last Chapter because many objections to pro-animal theories come from particular cases, e.g. arguments like these:

1. Animal experimentation is morally permissible, if not obligatory.
2. But if Regan’s theory is true, then animal experimentation is wrong.
3. Therefore, Regan’s theory of animal rights is not true.

And:

1. There’s nothing wrong with raising animals to eat them.
2. But if there’s nothing wrong with raising animals to eat them, then animals’ interests don’t deserve equal consideration.
3. If animals’ interests don’t deserve equal consideration, then Singer’s theory is false.
4. Therefore, Singer’s theory is false.

Of course, we want to know for what reasons we should accept these first premises, especially if we are familiar with ethics! But perhaps a way to avoid some of these particular cases about animals at this time is to focus on what the theories of the critics of pro-animal thinking imply for human beings, especially the young, old, weak and powerless. Various kinds of contractarianisms support poor treatment of animals, but they seem to support poor treatment of humans as well, and so contractarians often feel a need to defend themselves from these objections. Maybe these theories can sometimes be better evaluated from the more neutral concern of human-to-human ethics.
In evaluating moral theories and thinking about ethics in general, you want to try to have your principles or theories have the right implications for particular cases and have those implications for the right reasons. Unfortunately, there is no exact formula for doing this! Ethics can be hard.

**Necessary Conditions for Taking Someone’s Interests Seriously: Cases Against Animals**

While animal advocates focus on *sufficient conditions* for someone being in “The Moral Club” (as Rowlands puts it), anti-animal theorists tend to focus on *necessary conditions*, claiming that:

> We must take a being’s interests seriously, it’s wrong to harm it (except for very good reasons), we must respect it, etc., **only if** it is like this: ___.

They then typically fill in that blank with rather cognitively advanced abilities: sophisticated reasoning, thinking about one’s thinking, intellectual achievement, religious worship, and so on. Their challenge, of course, comes from the fact that many human beings lack such sophisticated minds, yet we think we must take their interests seriously. This problem for anti-animal theorists is known as the “argument from marginal cases.” To get around it, these theorists often attempt to do some intellectual acrobatics, trying to relate non-mentally sophisticated human beings (who seem to lack the stated necessary condition for, e.g., having any moral rights) to sophisticated human beings in peculiar ways. We will attempt to pin down their reasoning and see if it seems to be generally valid or is developed as an ad hoc response to this problem or worse.

**Finding Relevant Differences from Arguments from Paradigm Cases: Inference to Better Moral Explanations?**

Regarding above, anti-animal thinkers need to offer explanations of the clear cut cases of wrongs to human beings and *not* have those explanations have positive implications for animals.
Common Invalid Arguments

An argument is invalid when the premises do not logically lead to the conclusion. Many objections to cases against animals are of a common invalid argument form called “denying the antecedent,” where the premises do not lead to the conclusion or the conclusion logically follow from the premises. This argument is invalid:

1. *If* conscious, sentient animals have moral rights *then* seriously harming them is typically wrong.
2. *But* animals do not have *any* moral rights.
3. *Therefore*, animal experimentation is morally *permissible*.

This argument is of the same invalid pattern as this argument:

1. If you (the reader) were a professional basketball player, then you would be over a foot tall. [TRUE!]
2. But you are *not* a professional basketball player. [TRUE!?]
3. Therefore, you are not over a foot tall. [FALSE]

Non-professional basketball players should see that these premises are true but the conclusion false: this means that the premises do not lead to the conclusion. The same is true about the first argument above since the pattern is the same. The point applies to this invalid argument too:

1. If animals are “equal” to humans, as “important” has humans, have the same “moral status” as humans, then seriously harming them is typically wrong.
2. But animals are not “equal” to humans, not as “important” has humans, and do have the same “moral status” as humans.
3. Therefore, seriously harming them is *not* typically wrong.

Furthermore, what it *means* to say these things about “equality,” “importance,” and “moral status” are not *at all* clear: much explanation would be needed for the kind of understanding
needed to decide whether this claim is true or false.

Making the Discussion Concrete

Again, the core questions in ethics and animals are what moral categories we should think specific uses of animals fall into – morally permissible, morally obligatory, or morally impermissible / wrong – and the reasons why we should think this. This Chapter we should be trying to find the strongest, most important or at least most common and influential theories that would seem to support the conclusion that most (or any) routine, harmful uses of animals are just not morally wrong.

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 kind of moral obligations we have towards animals (perhaps you should ask about specific animals or different kinds of animals). Focusing on possible broadly “anti-animal” responses (which some might describe as “pro-human”), 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. What are the strongest, most important and/or most interesting objections that critics raise to the moral cases in defense of animals? Are these objections successful, i.e., do they defeat any of the defenses of animals (from the last Chapter)? Are these arguments sound? Why or why not?
3. For an audience who has not read the texts, explain Kant’s, Cohen’s, and Machan’s arguments against animals. What questions and objections do you have to them? How might they respond? Are their arguments sound? Why or why not?
4. For an audience who has not read the texts, explain the arguments “against animals” from contractarianism or the social contract theory (especially see Taylor’s discussion of
Carruthers, and Regan’s discussion of Narveson from Chapter 1). What questions and objections do you have for them? How might they respond? Are their arguments sound? Why or why not?

5. Should people find any (or all) of the cases “against animals” to be persuasive? Which, if any, is strongest, in your opinion, and why? If you think people should be persuaded, why is it that they often are not? (If people should not be persuaded, why are some people convinced?). Any other questions or objections from anything from this section can be asked here.

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**

Assignment: For an audience unfamiliar with ethics, logic and animal ethics, explain the strongest broad moral case to be made “against” animals and/or as a critical response to pro-animal ethical theorizing (this could be a single theorist’s approach, or perhaps it could be a combination approach). Explain what this case implies in general for animals and how one defends or supports such a theory about how animals deserve to be treated. Raise and respond to at least three of what you think are the most important objections to your arguments or your position. 4-6 pages.