

Disvalue in nature and intervention *

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THE FOX, THE RABBIT AND THE VEGAN FOOD RATIONS

Consider the following thought experiment. Suppose there is a rabbit and a fox that is about to capture and eat her. We are witnessing this, and we have two rations of vegan food. We consider what to do. Among the different ways in which we could act there are the following three ones:

- (1) We eat one of the rations of vegan food and see how the fox catches and eats the rabbit.
- (2) We give the fox one ration of our vegan food and we kill and eat the rabbit ourselves.
- (3) We give the fox one ration of our vegan food, we eat the other one and the rabbit runs free to live her life.

Other things being equal, (3) is the course of action which would bring about less harm for those involved. However, many people, even among those who are concerned with nonhuman animals suffering, believe we should do (1). Interestingly, though, many of them would not find it acceptable for us to do (2). However, (1) and (2) are equivalent as regards their result. The rabbit does not care whether it is the fox or the human who eats her. Moreover, as a matter of fact, (1) and (2) are equivalent if and only if in (2) we hunt and kill the rabbit in a *painful* way, which is what the fox would do (actually, if we cause the rabbit to experience not only pain but also fear and distress). Let us assume that in (2) we kill the rabbit painlessly. If this is so, by doing (1) we would be letting the rabbit feel an even more significant harm than the one that she would suffer if we do (2).

It could be claimed that in (3) there is a bad consequence which does not take place in either (1) or (2), that is, that we spend an extra ration of food. It may be responded to this that it would nevertheless be much preferable to use that food rather than to let the rabbit die. At any rate, if this were to be considered an important problem, there is a fourth alternative course of action we could follow:

- (4) We kill the fox and eat her.

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If having an extra ration of vegan food eaten is something that makes an outcome worse than another one, then (4) is *less bad* than either (1) or (2). I think, however, that (4) is certainly worse than (3), because in (3) no killing takes place.

Moreover, we can assume that in (4) we kill the fox painlessly. But we could also consider another possible outcome in which this does not happen:

(5) We hunt the fox causing her to suffer in the same way in which the rabbit would suffer if she was hunted by the fox.

This outcome would be obviously worse than (4). But if we take into account the claim that saving an extra ration of food makes an outcome better, it would still be better than (1).

Hence, the outcomes that would result from the different courses of action I have mentioned could be ranked, from less harmful to more harmful, as follows:

(3), (4), (2), (5), (1).

This means that of all the different courses of action I have presented, the one which would be worst would be letting the rabbit be eaten by the fox.

I claim this, of course, because I assume that the worst action is that which brings about the scenario in which there is more harm. This idea is extremely intuitive. However, the conclusion that follows from it in this case is, *prima facie*, very counterintuitive. Of course, it may be so because, after all, we could think that trying to put in practice the course of action (3) as a general policy could have unexpected indirect consequences that would be undesirable. This is a fair assumption, to which I will come back later. But for now I do not want to evaluate whether one policy could be successfully put into practice right now or not; rather, I just want to assess whether we have any *moral* reasons not to help nonhuman animals living in the wild. This idea alone is already counterintuitive for many, even though, as I have just said, it follows from extremely intuitive assumptions. So, regardless of the practical issue, there is a moral issue here, and it is the latter that I want to examine here.

So, how are we to deal with this problem? Whenever we find an idea which is counterintuitive, we strive hard to find a reason to dismiss it. I have tried to do this with this conclusion, and have searched for a response which may allow us to reject it. I will now present what I believe to be the main ways in which we may try to oppose this conclusion. However, I will argue that none of them is sound.

THE APPEAL TO MORAL AGENCY

It is often claimed that we are moral agents who can reflect on the results of our actions while the fox is not (by “we” here I mean those who can reflect on these issues, not “humans”, as it is often assumed, since there are a number of humans who are not moral agents). According to this, the

fox cannot be blamed for what she does. This is completely right. However, this tells us nothing about what we, rather than the fox, should do. This argument just shows that we cannot claim that the fox has a duty not to eat the rabbit. But the problem has to do, rather, with whether *we* should do something to avoid the harm that the fox herself cannot avoid doing.

THE RIGHTS OF NONHUMAN ANIMALS

We could also claim that by interfering in predation we are violating the rights of these animals to be left to their own business. Since the fox is not responsible for her acts, as we have seen, it would be a violation of her rights to interfere in her hunting. This line of reasoning, however, is also flawed. There are several things to be said here. Of course, we can reject the argument altogether if we do not believe in the existence of moral rights. But let us leave this reply out. Suppose moral rights exist. What would follow from this? Would the mentioned conclusion follow?

Well, firstly, I would like to point out that there is something quite worrying with this argument: the fact that it focuses on the interests of the fox while it forgets completely about the rabbit. If the fox has rights, then it seems that so has the rabbit. And if rights have a point at all, it is to protect the interests of those who possess them. So if the rabbit has rights at all, then it seems hardly credible that the best way to defend them is to do that which causes more harm to her. The idea that we are violating the rabbit's rights by saving her from a terrible death is implausible. If anything, we would be violating her rights by not helping her, as we will see below.

Let us turn to the fox's rights now. The argument I am considering seems to imply the assumption that we interfere in the rights of those who are not moral agents if we do not let them act as they want to. But this is surely an implausible claim. There are many possible examples to illuminate this. Let me put an autobiographic one. My parents have told me that when I was a baby I enjoyed throwing objects of different sizes through the window (I am reporting the truth). My family lived in a 5th floor apartment, and by doing so I could seriously harm some pedestrian. So they, rightly in my view, interfered with my throwing things through the window, and closed them completely when I was alone. I think that it is clear that by doing so they were not violating any right I might have. It may be claimed that I did not really need to through these objects through the window, while the fox needs to hunt. But note that in the thought experiment I am presenting here this is not necessary, because we can give the fox some of the food we have. (We may think that this makes the thought experiment useless, but I intend to claim later that it is definitely not.)

In addition, even if one would violate the someone's right by interfering in her action, this may perfectly be considered justified, given that the potential victim's rights would also be concerned. Consider again the example I have referred to. The fact is that even if my parents

were actually violating some right of mine when they did not allow me to throw things through the window, it seems obvious that they were justified in doing so, because of the risks involved for pedestrians. If that were the case, there would be a conflict between my alleged right to throw things and the right of pedestrians not to be harmed by flying objects. There is no relevant reason here to judge differently the thought experiment we are considering concerning the fox and the rabbit. Note, also, that in the particular case I have presented we are not harming the fox. The fox will eat anyway. However, there are some who in such a case would still reject that I should do (3). This means that they have reasons of a different kind to oppose intervening in predation.

In fact, once we accept that all sentient beings have rights, it is not clear how we can avoid the conclusion that their lives should be defended, even if they are being threatened by beings who are not moral agents. In fact, it is commonly believed that if a baby was to be eaten by some predator—say, a wolf—she should be saved. Why should we act differently if the victim is not human? It seems that such differential treatment can only be based on a speciesist position.[1]

HAVING THE CAPACITY TO AVOID A THREAT

In the preface to the 2nd edition to his *The Case for Animal Rights*,[2] Regan claimed that in an example such as the one I have just presented there would be a relevant difference between the baby and the rabbit. He has argued that the former would be still unable to deal with the difficulties of life, and thus to avoid the threat posed by the predator, while the rabbit would be fully prepared for her life in the wild. But it is not clear how this argument could succeed. After all, most humans would also defend saving a human adult who could take care of herself from being killed from a wolf. Consider also a situation in which a moral agent, David, was seriously threatening another moral agent, Maria. Suppose that David threatens to kill Maria because he needs a heart donor to her mother, and Maria is the only potential donor available. Suppose, also, that Maria, in turn, poses no threat to him or to anyone else, and is not violating anyone's right at all. Suppose also that Maria has the capacity to escape. Well, she might eventually escape, but her having this capacity does not mean that she will *actually* flee. She might not be able to do it for whatever reason, even if in principle she had the ability to do it. So if Maria does have a right and we can save her from the threat David is posing to her, it seems that Maria has a right to be saved.

THE APPEAL TO NATURAL VALUE

In light of this, it appears that the only way in which we can oppose the view that I have concluded in the rabbit and the fox thought experiment is by claiming that we should simply not interfere in nature. That is, basically, by assuming a sort of environmentalist position according to which there is some value in natural processes that outweighs the disvalue caused to animals

living in the wild when they suffer and die in terrible misery. In fact, I think this view is very widely shared. But I believe that we must reject it. Actually, my view is that those who assume it do so because they have speciesist attitudes. The reason for this is that they would not be prepared to accept it in any way if humans were involved. As I said before, they would not applaud the killing of humans by other animals, or their sacrifice for the sake of environmental balance. If they truly held this view, they would favor the mass culling of human beings, given the significant environmental impact humans have. However, they do not defend measures of the kind. And rightly so, in my view. But then, they can only accept killing nonhuman animals for the sake of the environment or natural processes if they assume a speciesist position. It should be no surprise, then, that the view that there is some sort of value in nature which outweighs the interests of individual sentient beings has only been defended from speciesist positions. As a matter of fact, those who claim to assume an ecocentrist view actually defend a combination of ecocentrism with an anthropocentric speciesist stance (see, for instance, Callicott's position).[3] They reject the idea that humans may be massively killed for the sake of the balance of ecosystems. Anyhow, the (more consistent) view that we may be culled for this reason seems hard to accept.

I conclude, then, that this line of reasoning cannot be convincing.

DISVALUE IN NATURE

All the reasons presented above fail to establish that we should not try to actively improve the situation in which wild animals find themselves. Humans often intervene in nature when that goes in their own interest. Actually, they often do it for the sake of environmental management (because of humans' interest in it). But there are no reasons to assume that intervention in nature can be right if it is carried out for those reasons but not if it were done to reduce the harms that nonhuman animals suffer in nature. As I have said, if the latter is not acceptable, then the former should also be rejected, unless we assume a speciesist position.

There are many ways in which nonhuman animals are harmed in the wild. Predation is just one of them. They starve to death, they are attacked by parasites, they suffer from sicknesses, etc. In fact, many of them live lives that contain only, or mostly, suffering. This happens in the case of all those animals who die when they are very young—eaten by others or starving for lack of food. Actually, as Yew-Kwang Ng[4] has pointed out, this may be the norm among the overwhelming majority of animals, whose reproductive strategy is *r*-selection.[5] *r*-selection consists on having massive numbers of offspring, of which only a tiny minority survives. If we are not speciesist and believe that all sentient animals are to be morally considered, there is no way to consider this fact as something neutral. It has to be seen as something negative.

In fact, it is interesting to note one point here. Among all the ways in which humans use nonhuman animals as resources there is one which significantly outweighs the rest in terms of

numbers: their use for culinary purposes. That is, eating animal products. All other uses of nonhuman animals pale in comparison of the huge numbers of animals bred or captured to be eaten. However, the fact is that, in turn, the numbers of animals killed to be eaten by humans also pale in comparison to the numbers of animals that live lives full of suffering in the wild. This happens in particular, as Alan Dawrst has perspicaciously pointed out, because of the huge number of invertebrates existing on Earth, which amount to the overwhelming majority of the animals on our planet.[6] As Dawrst claims, this number is so high that it outweighs doubts regarding sentience of invertebrates, in particular, insects.

Suppose that the odds that insects are sentient were 0.01 measured on a scale between 0 and 1 (this, in my view, is an extremely conservative estimate, I would claim that the odds would be far more closer to 1, but let us just assume it for the sake of the argument). Now, there are an estimated 10^{18} to 10^{19} insects. This means that concern for insects in the world should count as much as concern for at least 10^{16} animals that we knew could suffer. It could be claimed that even if insects were sentient, their interests would not count as much as those of, say, mammals. This may be claimed by assuming that mammals' capacity for wellbeing and suffering would be higher than that of insects. However, this would not change the matter significantly. Suppose that the wellbeing of mammals counted 10,000 times more than that of small animals such as insects. That would mean that concern for the latter should count as concern for 10^{12} mammals, which is still a very significant figure.

Given this, the wellbeing of nonhuman animals living in the wild emerges as a main cause of disvalue, and, hence, a puzzling problem for ethics that will not disappear just because we do not want to bother to consider it. The task for those who engage in reflection on moral problems is not to dismiss those dilemmas that are hard or paradoxical, but to engage in the job of understanding them setting aside any bias they could previously have.

WHAT TO DO?

For many, the claim that the suffering of animals in nature outweighs their wellbeing, and that that is not something good or neutral, but rather negative, is, at first sight, very counterintuitive. I deeply hope we had reasons to reject it. Regrettably, such reasons do not appear to exist.

As I suggested above, an easy solution would be to dismiss the question, maybe by proposing some ad hoc argument, or by assuming, perhaps, that there has to be some mysterious argument yet to be discovered that could solve this problem. But surely this cannot be the solution we are to embrace if we are responsible moral agents who do not want to be inconsistent.

So what are we to do regarding this? The fact is that we are already intervening in many different ways in nature. So it makes sense to figure out ways of doing it which may decrease, rather than increase, animal suffering. At any rate, it seems that it is not possible to succeed at present in the task of really achieving a *radical* reduction of the harms wild animals suffer. In fact,

as I already mentioned above, without the proper knowledge our actions could have unfortunate unforeseen consequences. This is a main technical reason to think twice before we intervene in any way, though it is not a *moral* reason not to intervene to benefit nonhuman animals if we had such knowledge. Note, as I mentioned above, that humans continuously intervene in nature—the only difference is that they do so for the sake of human wellbeing and/or environmental reasons, not for the sake of nonhuman animals. This is the reason why the thought experiment presented above is not useless at all. Furthermore, technical shortcomings in no way entails that we cannot do anything to help wild animals. There are two pragmatic enterprises on which animals need us to embark today regarding this. First, we should try to encourage the scientific community to study these issues. Second, we should engage in raising awareness, particularly among those who are already concerned with the problem of speciesism, about the moral significance of the harms that countless nonhuman animals suffer in the wild. This second task is actually far more necessary than the first one.

By doing this now, we will make it possible for those who will come in the future to do something about this issue. Our job now is to prepare the grounds for forthcoming generations to take action where we may be currently unable to act.[7]

NOTES

[1] Speciesism is the discrimination, i.e., the unjustified disadvantageous consideration or treatment of those who do not belong to a certain species. See Horta, Oscar, “What Is Speciesism?”, *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics*, 23, 2010, 243–66.

[2] Regan, Tom, *The Case for Animal Rights*, 2nd ed., University of California Press, Berkeley, 2004.

[3] Callicott, John Baird, *In Defense of the Land Ethic: Essays in Environmental Philosophy*, State University of New York, Albany, 1989.

[4] Ng, Yew-Kwang, “Towards Welfare Biology: Evolutionary Economics of Animal Consciousness and Suffering”, *Biology and Philosophy*, 10, 1995, 255–85.

[5] Pianka, Eric R., “On *r*- and *K*- Selection”, *American Naturalist*, 104, 1970, 592–97.

[6] Dawrst, Alan, “The Importance of Wild-Animal Suffering”, *Essays on Reducing Suffering*, 2007 (available at <http://www.utilitarian-essays.com/suffering-nature.html>).

[7] For helpful comments on previous drafts of this paper I want to thank Alan Dawrst, Daniel Dorado, Kate Marples and Mark Lee.