

The Pretext of "Necessary Suffering"

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Let us admit, then, that animals in *varying* degrees feel pain and fear, and that we have no general reason to think them less subject to these ills than we: if they have fewer forebodings, if they do, then by the same token they are buoyed by fewer hopes. A burning cat is as agonized as any burning baby. Even where we do have reason to impute a lesser pain, yet pain is painful. It has been urged, in a last desperate throw, that animals, who lack any consciousness of themselves, must find each pang of agony a new thing without past or future, so that they do not seem to themselves to suffer any long pain. Even if we grant the premises—which I do not—yet even pangs of agony are ill to be borne.

To be distressed by something is to find it an evil. We are so constituted that we are inclined to make others' distress our own, the more sincerely the closer these others touch us. Our solidarity in suffering with other sentient life, so Ruland thought [...], was enough to induce in us a respect for the life and dignity of non-human animals.¹ He was too sanguine. But at least it is very common now to pay lip-service to the thesis that it is wrong to cause unnecessary suffering to an animal. Necessity, of course, is often defined in terms of human activities that are simply unquestioned, so that (at most) such a rubric merely rules out technical incompetence. Such incompetency, being a symptom of inefficiency, might be left to the technicians' care were it not that a fundamental inattention to animals as beings to be taken seriously so often blinds men even to their own profit[...].

The difficulty about this slogan (that animals be spared unnecessary pains), minimal as it is, is that it already proves too much for the orthodox to stomach. I emphasized that it *is* a minimal principle, that it makes no mention of rights to life, and indeed allows "rights" only in the sense that animals are not reckoned mere "stocks and stones." As a radical moralizer I would go much further [...]; but here for a moment I will take my stand, on the claim that one should not cause unnecessary suffering to animals. Incompetence is to be ruled out, and so also are certain ends which are merely specious, or immoral in themselves. Wanton torture, or torture to impress a friend, or demonstrate man's superiority (to whom?), or to satisfy a particular minor whim for some food-stuff whose production involves enormous suffering, or to save oneself the trouble of taking due care must all, precisely, be counted wanton. The human ends within which we calculate necessity must be of some weight, otherwise the principle is *entirely* meaningless—for it licenses even incompetence: "if I am to conduct this experiment, run this farm with the minimum of care and attention and without troubling my head or heart about the problematic distress of the lower creatures, a certain amount of suffering in my stock will be *necessary*." "It is of little use to claim 'rights' for animals ... if we show our determination to subordinate those rights to anything that can be construed into a human want."² It is of little use claiming that it is wrong to inflict unnecessary suffering if anything at all will do as a context for calculating necessity.

Consider then: it is not necessary to imprison, torture or kill animals if we are to eat. The laborious transformation of plant proteins into animal protein, indeed, is notoriously inefficient, and wastes a great deal of food that would greatly assist human beings in less carnivorous places. It is not necessary for us to do this: I say nothing of what may be necessary for the Eskimos, for whom the orthodox display a sudden, strange affection when confronted by zoophiles (though the health of Eskimos might be better served by supplying plant-food). It is not necessary for us, and our affection for other human beings would perhaps be better shown by ceasing to steal their plant protein in order to process it into a form that pleases our

¹ Excerpted from *The Moral Status of Animals*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1977, pp. 42-45, 46-47.

² L. Ruland, *Foundations of Morality* (Tr. T. A. Ruttler), London 1936, pp. 373 ff.

³ H. S. Salt, *Animals' Rights*, London 1922, p. 7.

palates.

But perhaps flesh-eating, for some reason that escapes me, is held to be an end of sufficient weight. Consider then: it is not necessary to submit animals to their present distress if we are to eat meat. Indeed, it is not strictly necessary to submit them to any distress: now that liberal orthodoxy has apparently decreed that any concern over the integrity of the human corpse is a mere anti-social superstition (witness the demand for transplantable organs), it would seem a simple solution both to our flesh-craving and to the increasing storage problem to cook the victims of automobile accidents. But even if this economical solution is rejected, and our flesh-craving must be satisfied with the death of animals, it is still not necessary to submit them to the foul distresses involved in factory farming. The only case under which these distresses *are* necessary is if we are to go on eating flesh in our present quantities and without attention to their well-being—but that is a reason for changing our habits, not for defending them.

What follows for our obligations? Simply, that if we are to mean what we say in outlawing the unnecessary suffering of animals, we must become, at the least, vegetarians. I repeat that I say nothing here about the Eskimos, nor have I any interest in the desert-island castaway. We are not on a desert-island. Nor have I yet seen an orthodox moralist defend rape or even fornication merely on the ground that most males trapped in solitary and beyond the law with a naked and lubricious female would find their principles a little strained[...].

[I]t is plain that the present system of intensive farming cannot be defended. We can replace animal-protein by plant protein, even if we preserve some free-range beef herds and the like. We can reduce the amount of flesh we eat to the point where such wholefood farms can cope with the demand. We can always look for measures that will lessen distress in our animals rather than measures that will give us the least possible trouble.

Let us then be vegetarians, at least. For those who have recognized flesh-eating for what it is, the merest addiction, and one, as Shelley saw, to "kindle all putrid humours in [our] frame" ("Queen Mab" 8.215)—for such moralists the step is easy. It is not necessary, rather it is incompetent, to kill and torture animals to eat. Those who retain the end of flesh-eating but admit the iniquity of factory-farming and the need to reduce the demand for flesh, are in practice in no better state. Where so many eat so much flesh, there is no "moderate amount of flesh" that the moralist can decently eat. Until all have reduced their demands to whatever "reasonable compromise" between the passion for flesh and the distress of the animals the moralist has fixed, he must reduce his demand to zero. Again, he cannot in practice declare that he will eat only decently reared flesh—for he cannot tell what flesh has been decently reared, and if by chance he did he would, by buying it, be putting pressure on the farmer in question to increase his output by increasingly intensive methods. The open iniquity of factory farming has this merit, that it makes self-deception about the horrors caused to animals more difficult. It has this demerit, that by contrast the old ways seem courteous and kind. So the existence of concentration camps acclimatizes us to slums.

There is a simple technique for evading responsibility for the things we cause to be done. In the popular morality of the Sherpas, "To kill a living creature is sin. ... To kill yak and sheep is sin for the butchers, but not for those who eat the meat." The hypocrisy of this is revealed by the fact that though exorcizing spirits is also a sin, it is not the exorcizing lama, but the man who hires the lama, who is sinning. There is perhaps a certain sense in the casuistry: Buddhist monks, like Franciscan friars, thought it proper to eat what they were given. It was Brother Elias, the Judas of the Franciscan movement, who attempted a total ban on flesh-food, and was rebuked for it by God's angel. But however proper this may be for such, who would (in principle at least) surrender their own flesh to those in need, it hardly excuses the average irresponsibility of those who *require* other men to inflict suffering upon animals when, as they know, it is unnecessary[...].

Honourable men may honourably disagree about some details of human treatment of the non-human, but vegetarianism is now as necessary a pledge of moral devotion as was the refusal of emperor-worship in the early Church. Those who have not made that pledge have no authority to speak against the most inanely conceived experiments, nor against hunting, nor against fur-trapping, nor bear-baiting, nor bull fights, nor pulling the wings off flies. Flesh-eating in our present circumstances is as empty a gluttony as any of these things. Those who still eat flesh when they could do otherwise have no claim to be serious moralists.