

What Would the World Be Like Without Animals for Food, Fiber, and Labor? Are We Morally Obligated To Do Without Them?

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ABSTRACT Numerous animal rights and animal liberation theorists have concluded that nonhuman animals have moral standing and noninterference rights. Therefore, they say that humans are morally obligated to stop using animals for food, fiber, labor, and research. I disagree with that conclusion for at least 2 reasons. First, it has been suggested that food production models are possible using large herbivores that might actually cause less harm (kill) to animals than a vegan food production model. This is because intensive crop production used to produce food for a vegan diet kills (harms) far more animals of the field than extensive agriculture (pasture production). So, a combined food production system that includes crops and pasture harvested by large herbivores to be used for human food may kill fewer animals than would a vegan-crop model. Second, pragmatically, it is

improbable that all peoples of the world could ever be convinced that they must give up animals. In fact, it may be unethical to try to do that, because in poor countries, these animals are essential to the survival of the human populations. But what about the richer nations? Maybe they will or should be convinced to do without animals because of the moral strength of the animal rights and animal liberation theories. However, I believe that there are far too many obstacles for that to happen. What then are we morally obligated to do about animals? I suggest that animals do have moral standing, and that we are morally obligated to recognize their unique species-specific natures and treat them accordingly. That would mean treating animals according to their physical and behavioral needs or telos. That, I believe, is the most likely outcome of the conversation about animal rights.

Key words: animal rights, welfare, moral obligation

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INTRODUCTION

In the past 40 yr, increasing numbers of philosophers have examined the question of the moral status of nonhuman animals and our moral obligations to them. Perhaps the most notable of these philosophers are Regan (1983, 1996) and Singer (1975, 1996). In his 1975 book titled *Animal Liberation*, Singer (1975) used a utilitarian approach to examine our moral obligations to animals. This method of ethical analysis looks at the consequences of our actions and requires that we take those actions that have the best consequences (for the animals). In other words, we must do what results in maximizing the benefits and minimizing the harm to animals. He concluded that contemporary animal agriculture causes much pain and suffering to animals, and therefore, the animals should be liberated. Regan's (1983) book called *A Case for Animal Rights*, on the other hand, uses a rights-based approach to analyzing our moral obligations to animals.

He reasoned that animals are subjects of a life, have inherent value that has nothing to do with their economic value, and they have interests that are as important to them as similar interests are to humans. He therefore concluded that animals have noninterference rights. That means that they should be liberated and be able to live their lives without human interference. So, even though Regan and Singer used different approaches, they came to similar conclusions and suggest that humans must become vegans or vegetarians. In fact, those humans who do decide to become vegans and vegetarians and become animal rights (AR) activists do so with good reason and strong moral convictions and deserve respect and support for their position. As Thompson (2004) puts it, "there are innumerable reasons why someone might choose to become an ethical vegetarian, and those reasons deserve respect." Therefore, this paper will not try to convince anyone why they should not choose to become an ethical vegetarian. Rather, it will examine some of the weaknesses of the AR-animal liberation conclusion and suggest that the most pragmatic (concerned with practical considerations or consequences; Meriam-Webster, 1997) course of action worldwide is not with the elimination of animals for food, fiber, and labor.

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WHAT WOULD THE WORLD BE LIKE WITHOUT ANIMALS FOR FOOD, FIBER, AND LABOR?

The simplest answer to that question is hungry, cold, and tired! Of course, it could be argued that we need not be hungry, because we can eat grains, fruits, and vegetables; we need not be cold because of the availability of synthetics and plant-based fibers; and we need not be tired, because we have mechanical methods of plowing, planting, and harvesting our food. And this is true, at least for some people in some regions of the world. However, it is not true for hundreds of millions of humans who live in impoverished countries and will continue needing to use animals for these purposes (Bradford et al., 1999). Therefore, it may not be possible to apply a universal utopian moral theory about animal use worldwide.

So, the 2 competing visions of what the world would be like are, on the one hand, hungry, cold, and tired and, on the other hand, a world in which humans no longer cause animals pain and suffering and animals are able to live without human interference. As Regan and Francione (1996) stated: "The goal of the animal rights movement is nothing less than the total liberation of nonhuman animals from human tyranny." However, even if animals have rights, and most people are skeptical that they do, it is highly improbable that people of the world will ever be convinced to give up the use of animals for food, fiber, labor, research, etc.

ARE WE MORALLY OBLIGATED TO DO WITHOUT THEM?

I argue that we are not, for at least 2 pragmatic reasons. The first of these reasons is that there are models of food production which include animals that might actually harm (kill) fewer animals than a strict vegan model of food production. The AR theory (Regan, 1996) predicts that, if animals were no longer produced as human food, fewer animals would be killed (harmed) in food production. A paper written by Davis (2003) challenges that conclusion and begins with the question, what is the morally relevant difference between the field mouse and the pig that makes it acceptable to kill 1 of them (the field mouse) so that we may eat but not the other (pig)? It is known that intensive agriculture to produce foods like corn, beans, peas, and other vegetables (vegan model) kill far more animals of the field than does extensive agriculture to produce crops like pasture that can be converted to human food by large herbivores. This latter model has been termed a burger vegan model (Lamey, 2007). Davis (2003) estimated that at least 15 field animals would be killed per hectare in the production of food in the vegan model. According to the USDA, there are currently 120 million hectares of cropland harvested each year. If all those acres were used to produce corn, grains, beans, etc., then 15×120 million or 1,800 million (1.8 billion) field animals would be killed to produce a vegan diet. On the other hand, it was estimated that only 7.5

field animals might be killed per hectare in the production of pasture grasses that could be harvested by large ruminants, resulting in only 1.35 billion animals killed in the burger vegan (Lamey, 2007) model. These estimates are not conclusive, but they do suggest that models of food production involving animals may exist that harm fewer animals than a vegan model.

The second reason I say no to the question is a matter of pragmatism. Wise (2004) has listed numerous obstacles to the application of ethical vegetarianism. Although Wise (2004) states that he believes that these obstacles can be overcome by proceeding "one step at a time," I believe that these obstacles are too great to be overcome, even taking them one step at a time. The obstacles include:

1. Physical obstacles. Over 30 billion animals are killed annually for food worldwide.
2. Economics. The animal industries from production to processing to marketing involve hundreds of billions of dollars.
3. Political. Because of the money and political power of the animal production and meat industries worldwide, it is unlikely that animals will ever be granted legal rights and be liberated.
4. Religion. According to the Bible, God gave humans dominion over the animals. "The old and new testaments, St. Paul, St. Augustine, and St. Thomas Aquinas stitched into the fabric of Judeo-Christian doctrine the idea that nonhuman animals had been created for humans." (Wise, 2004).
5. Historical. The notion that animals were created for human use has been pervasive in societies since ancient times.
6. Legal. "The legal problem is simple and stark...law divides the physical universe into persons and things" (Wise, 2004). So, if an animal is not a person, it is a thing.
7. Psychological. "Millions believe nonhumans lack every important mental ability; they are made for humans, and this is how the universe was designed" (Wise, 2004).

To this list of obstacles, I would add a cultural obstacle. It would be highly problematic, if not unethical, to try to convince some peoples of the world to give up the use of animals. As Thompson (2004) writes, "arguments that purport to establish vegetarianism as a universal moral norm face a tough hurdle. It just does not seem reasonable to claim that goat-herding peasants or pig-herding Maring of New Guinea (or for that matter, the countless American pioneers who kept a cow, a pig, and a few chickens) are doing something to their animals that is comparable to the practice of human slavery. What is more likely is that people, like ourselves, reasonably well off and living in an advanced industrial society, may have some duties of diet that we are neglecting. But if our goal is to improve the lot of animals, the most effective way to redress this neglect is to build a network of producers and consumers who are dedicated to that end."

Though their long-term objective is still total animal liberation, even some AR-animal liberation (AL) advocates are calling for a short-term pragmatic approach to AR theory. For example, Stallwood (1996) who was editor-in-chief of *The Animals' Agenda* says that "there are two fundamentally important challenges which we face...as an animal rights movement. The first challenge is learning how to balance our utopian vision of animal liberation with the pragmatic politics of animal advocacy." In addition, Ingrid Newkirk (1996) of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals recognized that AR groups must be pragmatic and should endorse animal welfarism and that total animal liberation is "unrealistic."

Finally, although AR-AL theorists conclude that we are morally obligated to become vegetarian, I believe that it is unrealistic, perhaps even unethical, to force this conclusion on people of the world. Such an action, in my view, would be analogous to forcing Islam, Christianity, or Judaism on everyone in the world. In other words, just because I am Christian and believe totally that it is the 1 true religion doesn't give me the right to impose my beliefs on everyone else. The same is true for the AR-AL.

CONCLUSION

At a minimum, the AR-AL theories suggest that animals do count morally and that humans do have moral duties toward them. The pragmatist would say that, even in the United States and European Union, those duties include allowing animals the opportunity to live according to their specific species needs, allowing animals to express their telos (Rollin, 1995).

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