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"Moderate Animal Liberationism": Tactical Breakthrough or Dead End?

Ethics and the Beast, by Tzachi Zamir. Princeton University Press, 2007. Hardback, 158 pages, $35US

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Ethics and the Beast is a book with a mission. Its author, Assistant Professor Tzachi Zamir of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, hopes to advance the cause of animal liberation by removing what he perceives to be a serious impediment to its attainment, an impediment, ironically enough, that was put in place by the academic philosophers who were largely responsible for bringing the animal liberation movement into being.

The modern animal liberation movement was begun at Oxford University in the early 1970s by a small group of graduate and post-doctoral students in philosophy and theology who became known as "the Oxford Group." In 1971, three members of the Group, Stanley Godlovitch, Roslind Godlovitch, and John Harris edited *Animals, Men, and Morals*, a collection of essays that called for an end to human exploitation of animals. Of the 13 contributors, seven were philosophers or theologians by training, and two more were literary figures. In 1973, another member of the Oxford Group, Peter Singer, published a review of *Animals, Men, and Morals* in the *New York Review of Books* that introduced the concept of animal liberation to the broader intelligentsia on both sides of the Atlantic. Two years later, Singer published his classic *Animal Liberation*, and the idea of animals as our moral equals burst upon the world at large.

Singer is an act-utilitarian and a preference-utilitarian, and an unbiased application of these principles led him to the conclusion that in applying utilitarian calculus to any given situation, the interests of all sentient beings, including nonhuman animals, had to be given equal weight. This had been Jeremy Bentham's view, as well—even though he relegated it to a footnote in *The Principles of Morals and Legislation.* (Bentham 1948, p 311) John Stuart Mill backed away from Bentham's universal egalitarianism by arguing that the "higher," intellectual joys should count for more than the "lower," more physical pleasures. (Mill 2002, pp 240–244; *Utilitarianism,* Chap. 2) This appeared to give humans greater weight

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in the calculus than animals, as Mill, in fact, acknowledged when he included the happiness of animals in his system only "so far as the nature of things admits." (Mill 2002, p 245; *Utilitarianism,* Chap. 2) After Mill, utilitarians tended to ignore the animal issue until it was spectacularly returned to the spotlight by Peter Singer.

In 1983, American philosopher Tom Regan—who had also done post-doctoral work at Oxford, although he was not a member of the Oxford Group—published *The Case for Animal Rights*, in which he undertook to extend deontological ethics to at least the more complex nonhuman animals, thereby proposing to grant them the same nearly absolute protection that our doctrines of human rights grant to human beings. Although *The Case for Animal Rights* presents sophisticated defenses of Regan's position, his argument ultimately boils down to his belief that at least some nonhuman animals have "inherent value," by which he means that they meet Kant's criteria of self-awareness and autonomy, and must, therefore, be considered as ends in themselves. Initially, Regan restricted his extension of natural rights to mentally normal, adult mammals; more recently he has extended it include birds, and somewhat hesitantly, fish. (Regan 2004, *xvi*)

Equality and its Discontents

If accepted by our society and enforced by custom and law, the philosophers' demand for moral equality for nonhuman animals would have two principal effects on human beings. The first, which has attracted the most attention, is practical. Our societies, our families, and our individual lives have the exploitation and slaughter of animals woven into nearly every strand of their fabric. Animal liberation, whether of the utilitarian, deontological, or some other variety, would require fundamental changes in almost every aspect of our lives, with attendant social and economic disruption.

Less discussed, but in Dr. Zamir's view strategically more problematic, are the psychological and cultural implications of animal liberation. Our Western traditions place enormous value on our identity as human beings, an identity that has frequently been invoked by the term "unique human dignity," by which is meant that we are innately superior to all other beings. We are "the crown of creation" or the "apex of evolution," depending on your point of view; but for all practical purposes, the phrases are synonymous. Animal liberation theorists from Singer to Regan to nearly everyone who has followed them deny this innate human superiority and replace it with an egalitarian approach to our nonhuman neighbors that represents the latest—and to many, an outrageous—step in what might be called the Western World's Great Displacement, which is nothing more, and nothing less, than the uprooting of humanity from the center of the universe and the dumping of it randomly in the cosmos, where human beings are just another facet of being, with no particular priority in the grand scheme of things.

To employ a social metaphor, from at least the Neolithic Revolution we have smugly thought of ourselves as the natural aristocracy of the world, endowed by both might and right with the authority to rule everything we survey for the sole benefit of ourselves. The Great Displacement denies us our noble birth and lowers us to the status of ordinary citizens with no more right to rule than any of the other ordinary citizens—while degrading our efforts to dominate others from a God-given

right and the fulfillment of natural law to ugly bullying and brutality. Copernicus and Galileo displaced us from the center of the physical universe. Darwin and Wallace revealed that our status as the favored beings for whose benefit the universe existed had been a narcissistic fantasy. But even if we were merely the local product of natural selection as it operated on a small planet out on the edge of an unremarkable galaxy, old delusions die hard, and some "authorities," such as Raymond Dart and Robert Ardry, authors of the now discredited "hunting hypothesis," were still able to assure us that the evolutionary process had made humanity innately superior to animals and predestined us to be the absolute monarchs of planet Earth. Animal liberation completes the Great Displacement by denying us our inborn nobility in its entirety and leaving us no one to whom we can feel superior.

The concept that connects animal liberation to the Great Displacement is "speciesism," a term coined by psychologist Richard Ryder (yet another member of the Oxford Group), who introduced it in his contribution to *Animals, Men, and Morals.* (Godlovitch et al. 1971, p 81) Elsewhere, Ryder said that "Speciesism is like racism or sexism—a prejudice based upon morally irrelevant physical differences." (Ryder 2005) In other words, we have no more innate superiority over nonhuman animals than whites have over blacks or men over women. "Speciesism" was taken up by Peter Singer and quickly became the catchword of the animal liberation movement.

Dr. Zamir appears to believe that by making animal liberation the most recent stage of the Great Displacement, the philosophers who created it guaranteed that it would encounter massive resistance from other philosophers and, perhaps more importantly, from the public at large. In fact, philosophers like R. G. Frey, Roger Scruton, and J. Baird Callicott have attacked the notion of animal liberation with surprising vehemence, and give the impression that they are more upset by the Great Displacement than by the practical impact of liberating animals (although they object to that, as well). And all the while, throughout the world, the number of animals enslaved and slaughtered for human benefit, primarily for food, has continued to rise and now stands at approximately 50 billion per year, not counting aquatic animals, for whom there are no reliable statistics.

Moderate Liberationism

Ethics and the Beast is an attempt to break down this resistance to animal liberation by disengaging it from the Great Displacement. In summary, Dr. Zamir undertakes to show that many of the practical measures involved in animal liberation—vegetarianism and an end to zoos, circuses with animal acts, and sport hunting, for example—can, in fact, be promoted without denying the innate superiority of humans to nonhuman animals. As Zamir phrases it, "… the more popular speciesist intuitions [i.e. intuitions of innate human priority to animals] can be readily digested by liberationists without jeopardizing the call for reform" (p 15). To facilitate this digestion, he crafts a compromise approach to speciesism that he believes can be embraced by traditional speciesists and animal liberationists alike:

> Human interests are more important than animal interests, in the sense that promoting even trivial human interests ought to take precedence over

> advancing animal interests. Only survival interests justify actively thwarting an animal's survival interests. (15)

"Strategically," he tells us, "the advantage of endorsing [this variety of speciesism] from a liberationist stance is that the most counterintuitive implications of liberationism, on which antiliberationists focus, become conceptually dissociated from liberationism" (p 15). Most importantly, animal liberation becomes "conceptually dissociated" from the Great Displacement. We are still able to feel superior to animals, even as we protect them. Regrettably, Dr. Zamir never tells us *why* human interests are more important than animal interests. He devotes considerable space to defending the proposition that animals are entitled to some level of moral consideration, but contents himself with observing that speciesism rests upon strongly and widely held intuitions of human moral superiority and that in the final analysis "speciesism" is an irrelevant label that we would do better to scrap.

> My aim is to show that the category of "speciesism" is itself not important: accepting or denying that one is or is not a speciesist, at least in most of its senses, does not have much of a bearing on the issues that are actually debated and on the practices that need to be abolished. (15)

This is a remarkable claim. Can anyone imagine telling Martin Luther King, Jr. that "the category of 'racism' is itself not important"? Or telling Simon Wiesenthal that "the category of 'anti-Semitism' is itself not important"? Dr. Zamir's strategy is predicated upon a failure to recognize the nature of speciesism and the essential character that it shares with racism, anti-Semitism, and sexism. It treats the symptoms as if they were the disease while ignoring the underlying pathology.

A related problem here is that moral hierarchies of the kind advocated by *Ethics and the Beast* always degenerate into oppression. A subordinate class, whether human or otherwise, inevitably becomes an oppressed class. In the abstract, it is entirely possible to construct arguments that separate ethical consideration from egalitarianism, as Dr. Zamir demonstrates multiple times. But practically and historically, such arguments never succeed in protecting their supposed beneficiaries from their putative betters once the theory comes into contact with the real world. A moral system that is not egalitarian invariably ends up as a justification for immorality, however disinterestedly it may have begun. Moral egalitarianism is the only viable defense against humanity's natural inclinations toward tribalism, cupidity, and paranoia, as the history of the struggles against racism, sexism, and the oppression of gays and lesbians amply demonstrates.

The rest of the 136 pages of the book are devoted to exploring precisely what Dr. Zamir's modified speciesism means in each of the areas in which we typically exploit animals. His conclusions depend upon two distinctions, both of which represent a strategic retreat from the original animal liberation paradigm of full moral equality. The first is the distinction between superiority and the right to inflict harm.

Here it is interesting to note that British novelist, playwright, and feminist Brigid Brophy, who was instrumental in bringing the Oxford Group together and was herself a contributor to *Animals, Men, and Morals*, had published a seminal article in *The Sunday Times* of London as early as 1965 in which she not merely denied any

connection between animal liberation and the Great Displacement, but actually invoked innate human superiority to animals as the basis of liberation:

> I don't hold animals superior or even equal to humans. The whole case for behaving decently to animals rests on the fact that we are the superior species. We are the species uniquely capable of imagination, rationality, and moral choice—and that is precisely why we are under the obligation to recognize and respect the rights of animals. (Brophy 2004, pp 161, 162)

On this point, the majority of the Oxford Group parted company with the woman who might well be considered their "founding mother" and tied animal liberation firmly to the Great Displacement—as did the general consensus of animal liberation thinkers who followed in their wake. But in setting out to disengage animal liberation from this consensus, Dr. Zamir does not withdraw all the way to Brigid Brophy's position. Where Brophy attacked the issue head-on, he limits himself to demonstrating that the argument on which animal exploitation has traditionally rested, "We are superior to animals; therefore, we may harm them for our own benefit," is a non sequitur. Beyond that Dr. Zamir is unwilling to go.

Use without Exploitation?

The second distinction upon which Dr. Zamir's strategy depends is between use and exploitation. After noting that, "if such a distinction is impossible to draw, then virtually all animal-related practices should disappear in a just world," (which, of course, is the consensus animal liberation view), he points out that "if exploitation can be set apart from use, then liberationism proves to be a more flexible position that can accommodate some animal-related practices while objecting to others" (p 91). Dr. Zamir believes that exploitation can, in fact, easily be distinguished from use, and he defines that distinction this way:

> X uses Y when he perceives Y as a means of furthering his own financial (or other) well-being. This turns into exploitation when X is willing to act in a way that is substantially detrimental to Y's own well-being in order to further his own. By "substantial" I mean that the action predictably carries consequences such as shortening Y's life, damaging his health, limiting his freedom, abusing what he is (e.g. some forms of prostitution), systematically thwarting his potential (e.g. child labor), or subjecting him to pain or to a strongly undesired life (e.g. demanding inhuman workloads and thus creating human-slavery). (92)

While the distinction between use and exploitation can certainly be applied to transactions or relationships among human beings, it is by no means clear that it can properly be extended to transactions or relationships between humans and nonhuman animals, given the inability of animals to give informed consent and the complete, all-encompassing power that we have over their lives.

In transactions among human beings, using someone without their consent is considered exploitative, even if the person is not "substantially harmed." To cite a

trivial example, if I make calls on your mobile without your permission, I am exploiting you, even if my surreptitious calls cost you nothing. More seriously, medical experiments to which the subject did not consent or about which she was not fully informed are considered exploitative even if the subject is not harmed by the procedures.

It is hard to see a circumstance in which animals can give informed consent because (1) they cannot be made to understand what is being done to them and why, (2) they cannot express consent in any manner that is not fraught with opportunities for misinterpretation (which also makes it sometimes difficult for us to know when they are being substantially harmed in terms of their own subjective mental states and when they are not), and (3) the only other options open to them are often so undesirable as to be coercive. A companion dog who is mistreated can run away from home, but if he does, he will face hunger, thirst, hostile weather, and threats ranging from other dogs to automobiles. Similarly, after the American Civil War, many former slaves stayed on the land to become perpetually impoverished sharecroppers because lacking money to buy land of their own, their only option was to try to make a life in the city for which they had no skills and where they had no support network. Everyone agrees that sharecropping in the post bellum South was exploitative, even though the sharecroppers seemed to express a preference for it by staying on the land.

Secondly, the power imbalance between humans and nonhuman animals is so great that animals have no substantial ability to thwart human desires, and hence are unable to control their own lives in the face of human interference. In the context of this imbalance, only acts undertaken primarily for the benefit of the animal can be considered non-exploitative, and since, by definition, such acts also cannot be considered "use," the proposed distinction between "use" and "exploitation" loses its meaning in the context of human/animal relations—for the same reason that it loses its meaning in the context of human slavery.

The Implications of Compromise

On the practical side, Dr. Zamir's "moderate liberationism" (p 125) entails significant compromises in prescribed (and proscribed) human behaviors toward animals. As with all compromises, the questions here are, Will the compromises go far enough to satisfy speciesists? Or will they perhaps go too far to satisfy liberationists? Or again, as is often the case with compromises, will they satisfy no one except their author? On these questions hangs the fate of Dr. Zamir's enterprise.

Perhaps the most problematic of Dr. Zamir's compromises from the liberationist's point of view is his claim that vegetarianism is morally superior to veganism, which leads him to defend eating eggs and dairy so long as these are not the products of intensive confinement farming and the cows and chickens are not killed when their productive lives are over. The provision of a safe, (presumably) pleasant life not shortened by economic considerations in exchange for milk and eggs he characterizes as use rather than exploitation because he believes that it benefits both parties to the arrangement. In theory, this sounds good, and even though I am a strict vegan, I might have no moral objections to someone eating the eggs of chickens who roamed

free over adequate space, were given safe, clean, comfortable roosts and nests, were not de-beaked, received veterinary care when it was needed, and were able to live out their natural life spans in comfort and safety. That said, however, I still have to note that we have no way of knowing whether taking their eggs inflicts emotional distress on the hens, and if so, how severe that distress may be.

However valid this may be as a theory, in practice, it is hard to envision such an arrangement for more than a very few families or communes living in rural areas. Providing more than a miniscule percentage of the eggs consumed by industrialized societies in this manner is a logistical and economic impossibility. And so, we are left to wonder what is the benefit of proposing a principle intended to improve the lives of animals if that principle cannot be implemented on any significant scale in the real world in which real chickens must live, suffer, and die.

Dairy presents the same problem that we just saw with eggs. But with cows, there is an additional issue: cows cannot give milk unless they have been pregnant. To keep a steady flow of milk coming, a cow must undergo forced pregnancy (typically by artificial insemination) every year, and at the very least every 2 years. Eggs don't have to hatch, or even be fertilized. But calves have to be born unless we are willing to consider serial bovine abortions, which would seem to fall well to the wrong side of Dr. Zamir's notion of "substantially detrimental" to the cow, not to mention being prohibitively expensive and disruptive to a commercial dairy operation. And then the question becomes, What happens to the calves? If they are allowed to drink their mothers' milk, it is lost to humans. If they are fed a (necessarily inferior) substitute, that would appear to meet Dr. Zamir's criteria for exploitation in terms of "damaging his health," "abusing what he is," and "thwarting his potential." And even beyond that, it seems blatantly cruel to deny a baby his mother's milk because alien creatures who hold the power of life and death have developed a taste for it, even though it is not important to their health.

At present, a certain percentage of female dairy calves are raised to become dairy cows themselves, while the remainder, and all of the males (except a few kept to be semen donors), are either turned into veal, raised for slaughter as beef cattle, or simply killed to eliminate the expense of raising them. Although this fact is rarely acknowledged, the number of calves needed to maintain a continuous supply of milk for a human population is such that logistics and economics necessitate their slaughter. Commercial milk requires killing. Under these circumstances, it is hard to see how Dr. Zamir's compromise holds much promise for improving the lives of cattle.

Veganism is morally superior to vegetarianism, less because of theoretical considerations than because as a practical matter vegetarianism necessarily sacrifices more lives than veganism. Veganism requires an unintentional sacrifice of innocent lives incidental to the production of grain, vegetables, and fruit—insects, ground nesting birds, and field mice, for instance. But vegetarianism requires the unintentional sacrifice of these same lives, plus the additional lives incidentally sacrificed in the production of food for chickens and cattle, plus the deliberate sacrifice of the lives of calves and—for any economically and logistically sustainable commercial facility—laying hens and dairy cows when they grow too old and tired to be productive.

The practice that clearly causes Dr. Zamir the greatest internal conflict—and the various compromises entailed in moderate liberationism make it a veritable Petri dish for cognitive dissonance—is vivisection. After considering a variety of arguments for and against medical experimentation on animals—and one of the great virtues of this book is that Dr. Zamir is invariably scrupulous and fair in presenting the case on both sides, even as he is trying to erect a third side to the discussion—he concludes with what is, non-typically, more a cri de coeur than a rational argument. As you will see in a moment, he is so torn by this issue that he even, for this one and only time, abandons reasoned argument in favor of impugning the motives of animal liberationists.

> But do we really want to see laboratories shut down and all animal-based experimental research stopped? Do we wish to join hands with varieties of anti-scientists that do not share a fundamental respect for the spirit of inquiry underlying research, that have never felt wonder or pride or delight at understanding the complexities that science unravels? Can we genuinely undertake the responsibility for actively stopping or slowing down the search for better medication that will cure us and our relatives (as well as our companion and farm animals) in years to come? Do we wish to try out on ourselves new products and chemicals… Animal experimentation is at the end of a moral continuum, in which steps like a large-scale banning of recreational fishing and moral vegetarianism morally precede the termination of vivisection. These lighter stages have not even begun on a social scale. Stopping animal research should morally and legally be the last stop on a long road, and the suspicion that some of those who oppose it have not undertaken personal measures of protest against less important reasons for animal experimentation suggest that nonmoral motives play a strong part in antivivisection sentiment…. The time may come when animal-using laboratories will become proper targets for change. That time is not yet here. (82, 83, 85)

As an advocate for both science and animal liberation, Dr. Zamir is caught in a conflict between two of his primary values that he seems unable to resolve even to his own satisfaction. And as happens all too often in such cases, the animals lose, making this an apt illustration of my earlier point that ethical hierarchies always end up being twisted into justifications for injustice. In *Ethics and the Beast*, we can watch this distortion take place in just 82 pages.

"Slow down. You're trying to move too fast," is the argument of last resort for people who know that a practice such as slavery or segregation is morally wrong, but who are unwilling, for whatever reason, to take a clear stand against it. In his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. responded to requests from his "allies" in the clergy that he "go slow."

> We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct-action campaign that was "well timed" in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word "Wait!" It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This

> "Wait" has almost always meant "Never." We must come to see, with one of our distinguished jurists, that "justice too long delayed is justice denied."
>
> We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God-given rights.

Animals have waited for more than 10,000 years.

Of Principle and Practice

Ethics and the Beast hopes to persuade animal liberationists to abandon the egalitarian consensus pioneered by the Oxford Group and Tom Regan and adopt a more moderate stance that will convince speciesists to support more animal friendly practices. And there is, indeed, some value to this approach. Adopting a moderate strategy not unlike what Dr. Zamir proposes in terms of practical steps, animal protection groups in the European Union have made great strides in modifying or eliminating some of the most egregious cruelties inherent in factory farming, including bans on gestation crates and battery cages, progress which would not have been possible under an absolutist, "all or nothing" strategy. And more recently in the United States, the "moderate" approach followed by organizations like The Humane Society of the United States has begun to make significant progress against battery cages, gestation crates, and foie gras production. A similar approach in Israel has led to a ban on foie gras production.

But even so, most liberationists are likely to be reluctant to adopt Dr. Zamir's moderate liberationism as a philosophy, even when they are willing to pursue it as a tactic. Many liberationists view the pursuit of moderate, incremental gains as necessary interim steps on the path to what they cannot achieve all at once; but most will not, in my observation, accept moderate measures as the final goal or as the guiding theoretical principle of animal liberation.

Even when they must be compromised temporarily in practice, moral issues cannot be compromised in theory. And its advocates see animal liberation as the quintessentially moral issue since it is the only social justice movement in history (including environmentalism) which is purely altruistic, offering no prospective benefits to its supporters. Many liberationists see the Great Displacement as being at the heart of animal liberation because they believe that the symptoms cannot be healed without treating the disease, and that only moral equality holds any hope of liberating animals from exploitation and slaughter.

As our societies move from speciesism toward liberation, compromises will inevitably be an important part of that process. But these compromises cannot be constructed philosophically. They will have to be worked out in the rough and tumble of the struggle between liberationists and antiliberationists. The former will see them as way stations on the road to complete liberation, while the latter will see them as rear-guard actions fought to stave off liberation, or at the very least delay it. Although compromise is proving extremely useful in the short term, animal

liberation can no more be settled through compromise than could human slavery, civil rights for African Americans, or equality for women. Compromises are to moral issues what temporary cease fires are to wars. They may quiet things down for a while, but they do not bring real peace.

Conclusion

Ethics and the Beast is thoughtful, well written, shows wide familiarity with the literature, and analyzes the arguments of both liberationists and antiliberationists with insight, clarity, and fairness. It is an important contribution to the discussion. Nevertheless, I expect that its systematic attempt to ignore the fundamental philosophical issue of animal liberation will attract few converts from either side of the debate.

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