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End-state welfarism

Commentary on [Ng](#) on *Animal Suffering*

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Abstract: Yew-Kwang Ng’s research is the work of an obviously sincere, intelligent, and conscientious animal advocate. But I am unable to accept his starting assumption that animal welfare is an appropriate basis for animal ethics. More specifically I argue that animal welfare as a means to animal liberation is an issue that can be debated, but animal welfare as the ultimate end or goal of animal advocacy is misguided.

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Ng’s (2016) research is the work of an obviously sincere, intelligent, and conscientious animal advocate. But I am unable to accept his starting assumption that animal welfare is an appropriate basis for animal ethics. I will leave any critique of Ng’s particular findings to professional economists and biologists; in his own terms his suggestions may make perfect sense.¹ But as has been pointed out before by so many other animal advocates, a primary focus on making, say, human slaves more comfortable whilst we continue to exploit them seems misguided. This explains the gaping omission in Ng’s “illustrative examples” for his proposition that “There are simple ways to reduce animal suffering substantially at a very low or zero cost – or even a net gain – to humans”: He does not suggest vegetarianism (not to mention, veganism)! Indeed, this omission stands out as contradictory to Ng’s own assertion in the same article that “we should definitely do everything possible to reduce animal suffering where it is clearly unnecessary for either human or animal welfare....”

¹ With one exception, namely, the argument that “we are likely to gain converts more easily” for farmed animal reform than for wild animal reform because “We are in more direct contact and directly responsible for [the former’s] suffering.” On the contrary: Many of us have zero direct contact with farmed animals, and our greater responsibility for their plight is exactly what motivates our shying away from thinking about it. Thus for example, I recently witnessed a tremendous outpouring of outrage against elephant poaching in Africa by people who for the most part were probably not and never will be vegetarians, not to mention vegans.

I do not want to suggest that the acceptance or rejection of welfarism is a trivial problem. When faced with untold suffering by nonhuman animals at human hands, and slim to nil prospects of “liberating” these animals in the foreseeable future, what responsible and caring animal advocate could turn away? Need animal advocacy be considered a zero sum proposition that requires our commitment to only one or the other of animal welfare versus animal liberation? It would be nice to think that there is plenty of room for both approaches. Indeed, welfarists like Robert Garner argue that their approach is the more likely to lead to ultimate liberation. But liberationists like Gary Francione defend the contrary proposition that welfarism only serves to entrench animal exploitation by making it more palatable (figuratively and perhaps even literally).² This is a legitimate debate.

But what is distinctive about the approach of welfarists — such as Ng appears to be — is that welfare is precisely not instrumental to liberation but rather to the indefinitely continued use of other animals for human (and nonhuman) purposes. Let us end this “end-state welfarism.” Ng has set up the animal problem as the minimization of suffering, or, as he puts it, “eliminating all needless non-human and human animal suffering on this planet.” But this goal suffers from all the well-known problems with any utilitarian justification, and in particular, licenses using some to benefit others. It also shows the ultimate futility of that “needless” or “unnecessary” qualifier that Ng and other welfarists of the end-state ilk always include in their formulations of the goal of “eliminating all needless suffering.” Who will decide what is “needed” or “necessary”? Obviously we humans.

Note that even using animals to benefit animals is something that we would find unconscionable in the case of human animals if there were not very stringent requirements for informed consent and special circumstances. The “need” to cure cancer would never countenance vivisection of a human being. Just so, it will never be the case that Minnie the mouse will or would give her consent to be confined for life, manipulated, handled, operated on, subjected to pain, not to mention being bred to exhibit some morbid condition, and then guillotined or gassed at an early age, even to advance veterinary care for other mice in other labs.

Meanwhile, in Ng’s target article I find no suggestion whatever that eliminating the eating of other animals and animal products is part of his conception of the ideal. Eating fewer, yes, he argues ... for human health and environmental purposes. But I see no evidence that he intends the elimination of even factory farms. Ng does repeatedly state that he is putting forward only an “initial” or “starting” remedy to the animal problem, but a close parsing of the text shows that even the end state in view would be exploitative.

Thus, consider Ng’s comprehensive statement that “While we still desperately need advances in bioscience, human and veterinary medicine and technology, it makes far more sense for the initial focus of animal welfare advocates to be on reducing the enormous gratuitous suffering in factory farming.” On the one hand this introduces the necessity justification for continuing to

² See Francione and Garner (2010) for an articulate display of this debate.

experiment on animals; but by no means does it suggest that the presumably lesser “need” for eating animals is temporary, since the phrase “the initial focus” does not apply to initially reducing animal suffering in factory farms with an eye to eventual liberation, but rather to initially reducing animal suffering in factory farms before reducing animal suffering in animal experimentation. So this implies that tens and hundreds of billions of sentient lives could still be cut short every year for human consumption.

Interestingly, it is not even clear that animal liberationists are motivated by ultimate concern about welfare. Consider animals in the wild, as Ng also mentions. Theirs may not be happy lives. Certainly Darwin was sufficiently persuaded by his conception of evolution that no good God could have created the scheme of things he, Darwin, discerned in nature.³ Perhaps animals much prefer living in domestic conditions. But this seems beside the point to hard-core animal liberationists (like myself). This really isn’t about animal welfare ... although, to be sure, there is the strong hunch that any effort by humans to ameliorate the condition of animals in the wild would just make things worse, for them and/or the ecology as a whole. It is hard to see which considerations are behind the strong intuition that it is best just to let them alone (albeit making strenuous efforts to preserve habitats).⁴ But whatever the source of the intuition, animal liberationists like myself who are at odds with welfarists like Ng would have no truck with, say, the speculative proposal (McMahan 2010) to eliminate predators from the wild in order to make life there more pleasant overall.

The final indictment of end-state welfarism I will mention is the forever suppressed premise that death per se is not a welfare issue. The overwhelming majority of animals in labs are killed (Carbone 2004, p. 22). The overwhelming majority of animals on farms, factory or otherwise, are also killed, and in the prime of their youth (Patrick-Goudreau n.d.). Yet (or not “yet” but consistently with this) the canonic “five freedoms of animal welfare” conveniently omit the freedom to go on living (Farm Animal Welfare Council 2012). One must be supremely suspicious of any movement that so blatantly tailors language to its own purposes; and the welfarist movement does this to a degree that is beyond absurd (Marks 2015). The case for death as a welfare issue has been made by others (Simmons 2009 and Yeates 2010). If this were taken seriously, I could even imagine supporting animal welfare because it would then spell the end of the vast majority of animal use. But in the absence of that, I think the best bet for animal advocacy is to stress not animal welfare in Ng’s sense of “net happiness (enjoyment minus suffering)” but instead animal rights, to a degree analogous to which we accord rights to humans, to life, liberty, and habitat.

³ “This very old argument from the existence of suffering against the existence of an intelligent first cause seems to me a strong one; whereas, as just remarked, the presence of much suffering agrees well with the view that all organic beings have been developed through variation and natural selection” (Darwin 1958, p. 90).

⁴ Lee Hall (2010) argues for this position, albeit making an exception for animals whom we have domesticated into dependence on us.

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