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Sentience as moral consideration and disvalue in nature

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

Daniel Dorado

Abstract: In recent work Ng assumes that it is good to engage in activities aimed at promoting ecosystem conservation. The only way Ng can derive this from the axiology he assumes (the view that wellbeing is the only intrinsically valuable or disvaluable thing) would be to assume that ecosystem conservation would benefit the individuals involved. This can be so as long as value prevails over disvalue in the target environments. Ng seems to assume this is indeed the case, but he does not explain why, and it is a claim that goes against the conclusions he has argued for previously (Ng 1995).

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In prior papers Yew-Kwang Ng has made some very significant contributions to the discipline he has named “welfare biology” (Ng 1995; Clarke & Ng 2006). In his last paper, Ng (2016) examines again the ways in which the harms to nonhuman animals caused by humans as well as in nature could be reduced. He has made it clear that the only thing he regards as intrinsically valuable or disvaluable is the (positive and negative) wellbeing of sentient entities. He accordingly assumes that this is also the only criterion for moral consideration. It is for this reason that Ng rejects biocentrism as a sound moral viewpoint. In this way, Ng distinguishes his approach from what could be advocated from certain environmentalist views. However, in his target article he assumes that it is good to engage in activities aimed at promoting ecosystem conservation. This is a very common claim. But how does it follow from the view Ng holds? It cannot be based on appealing to the value of living entities, a criterion which, as we have seen, Ng rejects. Moreover, as Ng thinks only sentience matters for consideration, he cannot accept the main way in which concern for ecosystems has been presented in literature, that is, by assuming some form of holistic approach which values wholes rather than individuals (such as ecocentrism, the view that ecosystems are the entities that matter). So, in light of the criterion for moral consideration Ng assumes, how can he conclude that ecosystem conservation is one of the aims we should have?

We must note here that this is not a trivial problem. There are several claims Ng puts forward — about defending animals exploited by humans and helping animals in need of aid in nature — that can be compatible with ecosystem conservation in some cases (Cunha 2015). But there can be other cases in which conflicts arise between defending the interests of individual

animals and the promotion of ecosystem conservation. It is for this reason that this is an important issue needing to be addressed.

Given what we have seen, it seems that the only way Ng can derive that we should engage in ecosystem conservation from the principles he assumes would be to assume that this would benefit the individuals involved. This can be so as long as value prevails over disvalue in the lives of sentient animals in our target environments. In this article Ng seems to assume that this is indeed the case. However, he does not explain why he makes this assumption as it runs against the conclusions he argued for in his 1995 paper. In that paper, he pointed out that the overwhelming majority of nonhuman animals die shortly after they come into existence due to the most widespread reproductive strategy in nature, which consists in bringing into existence a huge number of descendents. In fact, his paper has triggered extensive literature on this topic promoting this idea (Dorado 2015; Horta 2015; Paez 2015; Torres 2015; Faria 2016).

So, to summarize, ecosystem conservation can be argued for from Ng's viewpoint if he has reasons to modify the claim he has argued for previously that disvalue is prevalent for sentient animals. In his last paper, Ng seems to assume that such reasons may exist, but does not explain why he believes this to be so.

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