

D. Chaniotis on “IS IT IMMORAL TO KILL ANIMALS?” a critique

In a recent paper in *Philosophy Pathways* Issue 204, Wyle Tan claims that 1) Animal rights arguments are not logically conclusive, 2) Someone may develop reasons in the future, but for now, there is no morally compelling reason to stop eating animal meat.

In order to support his thesis he rejects two points of view. The first states that "Animals can suffer and we should minimize suffering of all beings". The second, that "Animals have innate rights to life equal to human rights". My aim is to twofold. At first, to comment on his arguments. Secondly to show that it is indeed immoral to kill animals.

Concerning the first part, he claims that:

"If we can eliminate animals' consciousness of suffering, then killing such animals would not be morally wrong. This can be done by anaesthetizing animals before slaughter. Furthermore, in nature, animals kill other animals for food. Obviously, animals eaten by other animals suffer. If animal suffering is to be minimized, then we are morally obliged to stop animal predators from killing their preys. But to stop lions from killing and eating antelopes would cause great suffering for the lions. Imagine putting a lion on a vegetarian diet! Isn't it absurd? As we do not consider it wrong *intrinsically* for a lion to kill other animals for food, why should we think it is immoral for a man to kill an animal to feed his family? "

– Killing does not have to do only with the way this action is done. It is certain that avoiding animal suffering by anaesthetizing it prior to be slaughtered is better than killing it when conscious. But still slaughtering is effected indeed! Is it moral then to slaughter an animal even when unconscious? Imagine your dog. You would not think that it is a good thing to kill it. If you anaesthetize it first, killing your dog would be justified? Certainly not. But then, one might say that we kill animals for eating them. We are not going to eat our dog pet!! So now the purpose of killing comes in place. Are we going to kill a living animal for what? For fun? For pleasure? Because that is dictated by our needs? If it is our needs that come in play, and in our case the need for feeding ourselves or the members of our family, I feel

that you could agree that we can live without eating meat. In order to gain vital proteins and amino-acids we could consume other biological products such as eggs or cheese or soya which is rich in proteins. Our organized societies can well produce enough quantities of these products. Furthermore, I would like to bring you two different images. The first has to do with a newly born animal, a pig or cow or chicken for example, raised from the time of its birth until slaughtered, in a very limited space so as to constantly gain weight. The second image comes with the second animal living free in nature. The first lives in a man-made prison until death comes. The second lives free until death comes either from man or from an animal. Supposing now that you had only one of two available options: either to take the place of the animal to be slaughtered without pain; or die, after you had lived freely, by another predator of four or two legs. What would you choose? I bet the free life and its chances of survival would be more compelling.

Another point is important. Do lions have an alternative? Are they obliged to kill in order to survive or not? Are men obliged to kill in order to survive? Well, when hunting was invented by the human race, man had almost zero chances of survival without it. Perhaps even centuries later or even thousands of years later, hunting was the only resort or one of the few resorts if survival and raising children was aimed. This does not mean that hunting is a moral thing. But it could be recognized as an "obligatory" or "natural" action when a man's life or his family's was endangered. In that case the man, like the lion, would be obliged to become a predator in order to survive. However for the vast majority of humans nowadays, hunting is not within the natural process for survival but mostly a game or sport. Do you think that it could then be considered as a moral thing?

"The concept of Rights is meaningful within the context of a social contract forged by intelligent beings. Humans alone have this ability to agree to a mutually binding contract. But animals do not participate in such a human-constructed social contract. Hence it is meaningless to speak of animal rights. So called animal rights are foundationless."

– One then could ask: Why do we need a contract or social life status in order to be entitled to the right of living? Some thousand years ago, were there any contracts? At that distant phase of humanity, any human being had the right to live or not? I can understand that there was the feeling that no one had the right to take one's life. That, even though no contracts or agreements between societies existed. But if for someone was well established in his mind that he wanted to survive, the same was

in his neighbor's too. So no one had the right to kill if he did not want equally to become a target. Survival was again the primary task in one's life. So if we can recognize to ourselves the right of survival without any legal context or social constraint, what prohibits us from recognizing it to other animals? Certainly law is not an issue here. Chance or bad luck or the sharp teeth of a lion could be.

"Let's imagine a possible scene where you, your child and a dog are in a sinking boat that can support only two. Which one will you throw overboard in order to save two? Most likely the dog has to go. None will judge you as immoral to do so. You have acted according to an intuitive parental instinct to protect your child. It would be grossly immoral if you were to keep the dog and throw your child overboard."

– I certainly do agree that the dog has to be abandoned. However I would not be happy for my choice nor for the dog's fate. As a matter of fact I would feel very badly because I could not leave the dog onboard. But you could agree that I was forced to act in this way so as to protect the life of my child. Again, I was obliged to take a decision; I was in front of a dilemma to which the life of my child was of no comparable value. So even though my initial effort would be to rescue both, I had to choose between the two. However, if the boat was not sinking and I threw the dog overboard because I believed that it would be a good idea to take the picture of a drowning dog and moreover that this was a moral action, then I would probably be entitled for the immediate help of a psychotherapist.

"Animal rights activists' position seems arbitrary. Where do they draw the line between what they give the right to life and what they accord no rights? Animals with consciousness have rights, but insects and microorganisms do not. Why not? Aren't insects and microorganisms alive? Isn't vegetation alive too?"

– Insects and microorganisms or pathogens, even though they are alive, they must be avoided in order not to cause diseases. So this cannot be compared to animals at least the ones that can be eaten. But again, I would prefer to deter a mosquito from biting me than killing it beforehand. It is true however that to draw a line for the organisms to be let alive and those to be killed, sometimes is a hard task. As Wale Tan put it, can we consider vegetables alive and if yes why do we eat them? I certainly do consider vegetables alive since they can be reproduced. On the other hand we as humans have to eat something in order to stay alive. But morality or

immorality on killing animals considers animals as they really are, i.e. well-developed complex biological entities, with consciousness, capability of communication and expression of feelings, with the inherent right to live and evolve but also characterized with the basic instinct of survival. No animal wishes to die, no animal welcomes the predator that kills it, no animal will stay fearless or still when the intentions of a man to kill it are deciphered. So at issue here are exactly these animals. Nothing to do with microorganisms, or viruses or even plants.

"Here is a dilemma. If we see no wrong for a lion to hunt and kill an antelope for food, human-predators do no wrong in killing animals for food too."

– The presented "dilemma" has been answered already. It is not an actual dilemma though, since the lion can only hunt, it is in its nature. Humans have many other options. But most importantly they are humans; they can decide what is right and what is wrong.

"Without an ultimate foundation for morality, activists only can support vegetarianism with an argument for compassion. The question why must we be compassionate towards animals remains unanswered. The activists can reply that we should be compassionate towards animals because they can feel pain and feeling pain is evil. Why should we care about animals' pain, they can answer because animals have inalienable rights. Such replies by the activists bring us back to the issues at the beginning of this essay. Isn't it logically circular? Hence we are left with an unsolved puzzle: Are there compelling logical reasons to treat animals with an equal right to life?"

– Murder is an immoral action. But still we, as humans, do we possess an ultimate foundation for morality? Do we have a norm for every possible action? Don't we have to consider and sometimes be found under the burden of hard dilemmas? Nevertheless, we are not impeded from recognizing murder as an immoral action. It is therefore not necessary when the rightness or wrongness of an action is obvious, to seek for a complete moral system in order to judge. But still the question remains as Wyle Tan put it "why should we care about animals' pain?" Let's see if we can find some arguments.

Anyone would accept that humans are set apart from other animals for many reasons one of which is that they are sensitive to value their actions in a way which is totally absent from other animals. So humans might kill in order to survive, and in that sense they follow a natural instinct. But they also reflect on their actions. And can feel remorse if they had other options or if their actions were unnecessary or unjustifiable. Taking a step back, in the beginning of our discussion, we are talking about morality and/or immorality. But when an action can be characterized as moral? That is a difficult question. Even though various dictionaries give various definitions, we could naively say that a moral action is one with which one feels that it is for the good of others, an action that could cause internally but also externally more joy than sorrow. So we could simply ask, who feels joy when is killing an animal? Who is the one that cannot see that an action like this causes pain and suffering? On the other hand, if we think morality as a standard or norm for doing or not doing, then under its auspices we can decide if an action must be done or must not be done. A moral action is the one that has to be done, an immoral that has to be avoided. If killing and eating animals is included in the moral list, then under no constraint or reservation animal slaughtering must occur. Keeping your dog as a pet would then be an immoral behavior. Leaving a bird alive could be a sin that would condemn you to eternal suffering at hell. I think the whole matter is becoming absurd enough to pursue it further. Yes indeed we eat animals. Yes we keep them imprisoned for all their life so as to grow enough and then kill them. Yes we are accustomed to the idea of not being able to live without meat. In the same manner, murders happen, or robberies or other atrocious acts. This does not mean that these actions are moral just because they do happen! Morality tells us that they should not happen at all.

If we would like to elaborate more, we could agree that no one would like to be treated in a way that would cause him pain or suffering or deprive him from his rights to be free or alive. Do we recognize the same treatment as justifiable for animals? We have the power as the mightiest species on earth, to recognize (or not) that other species have these rights even though they have not signed any contract with us. If we, as the mightiest species, deny that animals have the right not to suffer or die from our hands, we place ourselves at a position that we do not deserve. We choose to cause pain, suffering or take a life even if we admit that this is something that we would not like to sustain. Animals kill. That's all. They do not reflect on their actions. No moral issues here. They just kill to survive. No killing for pleasure or fan. But more importantly, no killing after reflection on others animal suffering or on morality of killing. We, as humans, if choose to kill even

though we have the ability to reflect on morality, we choose to act as animals despite the fact that we are mentally superior to them. Even worse, we prefer to baptize "not immoral" an action which if not immoral could only be moral. But I suspect nobody would insist that it is moral i.e. ethical obligatory, to kill. Our selfishness leads us to try to find excuses in order to continue indulging in our old habit of animal eating without any remorse. It is the same selfishness that does not allow us to see that in that way we put ourselves below that of the beasts since we behave like them even we can doubt on the moral grounds of doing so. And that answers the posed question "why should we care about animals' pain?". We should care if we regard ourselves as what we are, the mentally superior species on this planet. We should care simply by not denying our mere nature which is different from that of the animals'.

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Email: dchaniotis66@hotmail.gr