Animal Ethics and the Argument from Absurdity

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ABSTRACT

Arguments for the inherent value, equality of interests, or rights of non-human animals have presented a strong challenge for the anthropocentric worldview. However, they have been met with criticism. One form of criticism maintains that, regardless of their theoretical consistency, these 'pro-animal arguments' cannot be accepted due to their absurdity. Often, particularly inter-species interest conflicts are brought to the fore: if pro-animal arguments were followed, we could not solve interest conflicts between species, which is absurd. Because of this absurdity, the arguments need to be abandoned. The paper analyses the strength, background and relevance of this 'argument from absurdity'. It is claimed that in all of the three areas mentioned above, the argument faces severe difficulties.

KEYWORDS

Animal ethics, rights, equality, interest conflicts, life-boat dilemma

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INTRODUCTION

Many in animal ethics have presented strong arguments in favour of the inherent value, interest equality and/or rights of sentient non-human animals (Singer, 1975; Regan, 1983; Midgley, 1983; Pluhar, 1995; Rowlands, 1998; Cavalieri, 2001; DeGrazia, 1996; Francione, 1995). All these arguments suggest a basic equality between human and non-human animals. Accordingly, there have been numerous attempts to refute these arguments (Frey, 1980; Carruthers, 1992; Cohen, 1997; Posner, 2004). One common claim is that even if the arguments for the inherent value, moral rights, or equal consideration of the interests of animals are theoretically or logically valid (a matter that remains an object of dispute), there are further reasons to reject them. This 'argument from absurdity' maintains that the above notions have absurd implications and that, due to this absurdity, they cannot be accepted. The argument has many versions. Perhaps the most common version states that, were the notions mentioned above applied to non-human animals, we could not solve interest conflicts between different species.

Even though very common, this 'argument from absurdity' has received little attention in the literature. The current paper gains its impetus here. It investigates whether granting animals individual value, interest equality, or rights would lead to absurd consequences, and examines the background and relevance of the argument from absurdity. Whether such value, equality or rights can be defended, is another issue: it is their possible consequences that are of interest here.

THE ARGUMENT FROM ABSURDITY

It is often argued that if, indeed, all sentient animals have categorical, individual value, there is no basis for making prioritisations between individual beings of different species: we could not solve conflicts between monkeys, dogs and humans. This, again, is viewed to be an absurdity. The argument has two strands: one emphasising *human-animal conflicts*, and the other emphasising *animal-animal conflicts*.

Following the first strand, the life-boat dilemma is used as an example, and it is suggested that, were inherent value, rights or interest equality accepted, we would have to toss a coin over whether to keep on board humans or other animals. This dilemma is cast in many forms. Mary Ann Warren argues that farmers could not harvest their fields, for this would lead to the massacre of thousands of small animals, and obviously the right or interest to

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live is superior to the right or interest to harvest (Warren, 1997). Eric Moore maintains that we would have no tools with which to choose between a hiker and a wolf (Moore, 2002), and Richard Posner criticises 'the argument from marginal cases' (according to which consistency demands that animals and humans of equal mental ability be treated alike), stating that it would justify inflicting severe pain on an infant, if the only other option was to inflict even greater pain on a dog. We would also have to favour 100 chimps over one human being – a matter that causes Posner 'deep revulsion' (Posner, 2004, p. 66). Hence, we would have to give up many everyday practices. We would also be obliged to inflict pain on humans in order to avoid causing greater pain in animals, to choose randomly between the life of a human and the life of an animal, and to favour animals in cases where their number was greater than that of humans.

The second strand concentrates on conflicts between animals. The claim is that if, indeed, all sentient animals have equal value, interests or rights, we cannot make any moral differentiations between them. For instance, Carl Cohen has stated that this would mean that oysters and whales are of the same moral value, and that a conflict between the two is irresolvable (Cohen in Cohen and Regan, 2001) (a similar argument was previously made by Descartes in *Discourse on Method*). Thus, worming a dog could become a serious moral issue, and we would possibly have to restrict the movement of elk and bears in case they might trample on mice and frogs. Such a conclusion is understood to be utterly absurd.

A prominent version of the argument concentrates on predation. Some in the field of environmental philosophy have criticised the theory of animal rights by maintaining that if, indeed, rabbits do have rights, we have to protect them against any violators, human or fox (Callicott, 1989; Sagoff, 1984). It would seem that, if animal rights were to be accepted, we would have to bring an end to predation. For instance, Roger Scruton claims that: 'Any law which compelled a person to respect the rights of non-human species would weigh so heavily on the predators as to drive them to extinction in a short while' (Scruton, 1996, p. 60, see also Posner, 2004). Since this is understood to be an absurd consequence, the theory of animal rights is rejected.

Therefore, the argument from absurdity is relatively clear-cut. Granting non-human animals inherent value, equality of interests, or moral rights would make inter-species interest conflicts impossible to solve in various crucial areas of life, and due to the presumed absurdity of the situation, we ought to base the moral status of animals on something other than notions that rest on basic equality.

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POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

The argument from absurdity faces difficulties, some of which are rather obvious. First of all, it overlooks that there are various tools with which to make prioritisations other than value, equality of interests, or rights. In fact, it is rather odd to assume that ethics ends in these notions: on the contrary, they are only the beginning of moral deliberation. Notions such as 'animal rights' are the cause for moral reflection: we need to start thinking about the human-animal relationship more carefully, when they are invoked. A common claim is that *equal consideration* does not, by necessity, entail *equal treatment* (DeGrazia, 1996). Contextual considerations and various ethical principles may offer the grounds for decision-making after the initial moral status of a being has been established. Therefore, a particularist take on ethics may offer a way out from absurdity (Aaltola, 2005). Of course, it has to be noted that practical decisions based on contextual considerations can be messy. However, the fact that prioritisations between beings are difficult to make does not in itself mean that there is something faulty in the original moral argument; rather, it merely reflects the fact that the reality in which we live is complex and demanding. This becomes clearer when considering intra-human relations: prioritisations between humans can be painstakingly difficult, but not many would suggest this to mean that human beings are not equal, or that 'human rights' should be abolished.[1]

Secondly, the argument from absurdity is in danger of circularity. It is, at times, assumed without further justification that humans do have greater value. For instance, Moore uses the term 'unacceptable' to describe inter-species equality (Moore, 2002) without clearly stipulating where the unacceptability derives from. One can descriptively state that some of the pro-animal arguments are 'strange' in the context of common, anthropocentric notions, but to make prescriptive moral judgments about them requires more – the underlying belief in value-difference needs to be explicated. As they stand, some claims of absurdity rest on an assumption, which serves as both the starting premise and the conclusion: 1) humans are of greater value, 2) therefore, human-animal equality is absurd, 3) therefore, humans are of greater value. A certain sense of anthropocentrism is affecting what is considered 'normal' and 'absurd'. It is precisely this cultural presupposition that many in animal ethics have questioned, and the criticism cannot be met by merely reiterating that same presupposition. Of course, the argument is not by necessity circular. One can maintain that the difficulties related to decision-making render the inherent value, rights, or equality of the interests of animals absurd without first assuming that humans must be of greater

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value. However, anthropocentric assumptions are often lingering around the argument from absurdity, and this risks rendering it less credible.

Similar arguments apply to intra-animal conflicts. For instance, the claim that the interests of all sentient animals should be taken equally into account does not mean that there are no ways in which to make prioritisations between species (for an example, mental capacities may be of relevance if they directly affect the interests involved – see Singer, 1993). It also has to be noted that a hierarchical notion of the value, interests and rights of different animals may itself be highly absurd. How are we to make distinctions between parrots, dogs and cows (as Angus Taylor asks: 'How are we to trade off the lives of caribou against the lives of wolves?' – see Taylor, 1996). Placing animals into different hierarchical categories would not only be extremely difficult, but would also render decision-making rather absurd – we could, for instance, end up with a hundred categories with different scores, and give the caribou the score of 60 against the wolf's score of 61, thereby turning moral decisions into odd calculations, amongst which we would get lost as soon as numbers (three caribou against one wolf) or different combinations (a caribou and a sheep against the wolf) were added. Finally, the issue should not be *how* to differentiate between animals, but rather *why* differentiations into 'production animals', 'pets', 'experimental animals', etc. are seen as self-evident. What is considered 'absurd' is often based on a human bias, whether it be cultural, economical, or culinary.

But what about predation – would we have to save the rabbit from the wolf? Regan has tried to tackle this criticism by pointing out that rights exist only if they are addressed to a *moral agent*. Since the fox is not such an agent, the rabbit does not have a right against him (Regan, 1983, pp. 284–285). This reply has not satisfied all, however. Stephen Clark has claimed that the harm suffered by the rabbit is the same regardless of whether the fox is a moral agent or not (Clark, 1997, pp. 16–18), and Steve Sapontzis has pointed out that we have a duty to stop a child from tormenting a cat despite the fact that the child is not a moral agent (Sapontzis, 1987, pp. 230–231). Therefore, there may be reasons to rescue the rabbit, even if the fox does not understand her rights. Surely animal rights theorists, such as Tom Regan, would struggle to let an animal suffer simply because she lacks rights on the basis of a technicality: what about the value and welfare of the rabbit? That is, even if 'rights' were denied in this instance, the animal rights theorist might still have reasons to rescue the rabbit, which would, the argument goes, be absurd.

Moreover, the rabbit may also have a right. The issue boils down to *assistance*. Even if the rabbit does not have rights against the fox, rights

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may be addressed towards moral agents who are in a position to help. Dale Jamieson has emphasised this with his example, in which we are in a position to prevent a harm done to another being by committing an act x, but where the situation takes two different forms: in situation A the source of the harm is a moral agent, and in situation B the source is not such an agent. According to Jamieson, it would be highly absurd if we were to prevent the harm in situation A, but not in situation B. He maintains that a sensible take on the rights theory acknowledges that in both instances the concept of a 'right' can apply, for the right is addressed toward the person in a position to help, rather than the source of the harm (Jamieson, 1990). This is at the heart of the original claim of absurdity: are we to assist the rabbit?

The issue of assistance is controversial, as we talk only sparingly of duties to help. *Negative duties* are at the heart of much liberal politics and ethics, and go well together with *liberty rights*. Therefore, moral views tend to highlight the duty to refrain from harming others whilst overlooking the duty to help those suffering from harm. In fact, *positive duties* are often categorised as supererogatory, and hence voluntary. In cases where such duties are understood to be obligatory, they tend to depend on special contracts (an example being the parent-child relationship). Thus, the duty to assist the rabbit would not apply. However, there is room for criticism. Surely not all positive duties are non-mandatory, supererogatory acts or only required in the context of special relations. One factor, which determines the existence of positive duties, is the sacrifice required. We do not have to turn into self-sacrificing moral saints (Kamm, 1999; Crisp, 1999), but are required to assist if the sacrifice is not unreasonable (Jamieson, 1990; MacIntyre, 1999). Therefore, we potentially could be required to assist the rabbit if doing so would not make us significantly worse off. Thus, Sapontzis has boldly suggested that predation should, ultimately, be brought to an end. For him, the ideal world does not include predation (Sapontzis, 1987, p. 247).

However, we should not get carried away. It has to be remembered that the fox has an equal right to survive as does the rabbit. This is something that, for instance, Evelyn Pluhar, David DeGrazia and Jennifer Everett have pointed out: since the fox has her own vital interests at stake, we cannot simply conclude that the rabbit should be saved (Everett, 2001; Pluhar, 1995, pp. 276–277; DeGrazia, 1996, p. 277). However, there is still room for criticism. We could claim that since a fox kills hundreds of rabbits in her lifetime and rabbits do not kill anyone outside Monty Python films, we ought to let the numbers decide and favour the rabbits.

A possible solution to this rather utilitarian claim is offered by Pluhar: preventing predation would ultimately lead to more death and suffering than

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is caused by predation. This is because ecosystems would crash, leading to a catastrophe that would affect even more animals (Pluhar, 1995, p. 277). Pluhar's response echoes the sentiments of many. Regard for the value, interests and/or rights of animals also requires regard for the frameworks that sustain animals – when discussing predation, one has not only to think about what happens to the rabbit that is eaten, but also what happens to the majority of animals if there are no predators left to do the eating. Moore has criticised this response by arguing that single interventions would not lead to large-scale harm: we could save the odd rabbit without ecological consequences (Moore, 2002). Therefore, it is suggested that the original problem still applies: Tom Regan would have to stop the fox from killing the rabbit, for that one act would not have environmental consequences. However, this argument is not fruitful, for the issue does not concern the consequences of contingent acts, but is a matter of general principle. Viewing predation as morally dubious would require us to actively eradicate it on a general level, not just to intervene when we happen to witness it. Therefore, we need to take into account the consequences of a large-scale eradication when deliberating on the ethics of predation. Moreover, even if emphasis was on contingent acts, the argument would not work, as saving the odd rabbit from foxes would not amount to a great absurdity (in fact, even many people of the anthropocentric persuasion, when having their picnic disrupted by the chase, might well choose to save the rabbit without blinking an eyelid).

Another solution lies in stepping outside the utilitarian framework. A crucial factor in the pro-animal arguments is respect for animals *as they are*, including whatever their needs and tendencies happen to be. Obviously, this means that animals should not be expected to either follow the codes of moral agency, or face extinction. *Moral value* does not imply that one should be *made moral*. Sapontzis has claimed that the task of morality is not to simply respect humans and other animals as they are, but also to cultivate them (we would not allow rapists to go on raping, even if a tendency to do so was carved deeply into them, and perhaps we similarly ought to introduce foxes to new ways of existence) (Sapontzis, 1987, p. 232). However, (rather unintentionally) such a claim can be anthropocentric, as it evaluates animals from the viewpoint of intra-human moral codes, and places animals in the same category with morally dubious criminals. 'Cultivation' only makes sense in relation to the potential, or the telos, of a being. It is the potential of a human being to become more morally aware – however, it is not the potential, nor in the nature, of a predator to cease killing. If we are to defy

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anthropocentrism and respect animals as they are, predators are to be let to flourish.

There is a further reason why we ought not to intervene with predation. Although positive duties should not be overlooked, negative duties do often hold more importance. For instance, I have the duty to refrain from killing my irritating neighbour, but do not have a duty to personally travel to another part of the world to save the starving. Negative duties take priority, for we have to first be responsible for our actions (such as actively causing a death), before concentrating on omissions (such as the failure to assist those in danger of dying) (LaFollette and Shanks, 1996). This means that the right of the fox takes priority. We have a stronger duty to not intervene with the fox than to assist the rabbit.[2]

Finally, there is the problem of human prey. If we are not to intervene with wolves killing elk, are we to let them eat hapless human hikers? A possible answer is self-protection: we have the right to protect ourselves from other animals. However, Moore rightly points out that self-protection is not a solution, as the choice I am making is not necessarily between me and the wolf, but Mary and the wolf (Moore 2002). Everett has tried to tackle this problem by arguing that the duty to assist only applies in cases, where 'assistance is necessary as a matter of course for those creatures to flourish according to their nature' (Everett, 2001). One interpretation of this claim is that human flourishing is independent from being wolf dinner, whereas such a fate is a part of prey animal flourishing. Thus, we should assist humans, but not other animals.

However, this interpretation is problematic, for there is no basis for the suggested categorical distinction. The distinction cannot be inferred from the flourishing of *species*, for if predation is considered to be a part of animal flourishing because of evolutionary history or population control, the same could be said (no matter how gruesome it sounds) about human beings. Therefore, the difference has to do with *individuals*. However, why would being killed by a wolf be a part of animal flourishing on an individual level? That is, why would an individual animal 'flourish' when torn to pieces? Marc Fellenz has implied that hunting is a sign of respect for the fear, alertness, and other predation-related features of prey animals (Fellenz 2007). Hence, hunting or predation will 'fulfil' the telos of the animal as she meets the fate in relation to which evolution has designed her. However, the argument does not stand. It does not take into account that evolution has designed prey animals *against* predation: that their heightened senses, camouflage and muscle capacity exist because evolution has enabled the animals to avoid being caught. Being caught and killed flies, in this sense, in the face of

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evolution and all that the animal's mental and physical capacities stand for. Hence, it can be argued that hunting is anything but a sign of respect, and that being killed by predators does not fulfil the telos of prey animals. Most importantly, it seems self-evident that, from the viewpoint of the animal, fear and pain are never positive features, and thus, that predation will not enable the animal to flourish.

A better interpretation of Everett's argument is that being helped by others is a part of human flourishing. Everett relies on the notion of 'human community': because we are a part of this community, we – but not rabbits – ought to be assisted. However, problems emerge again. 'Human community' seems to refer to a 'moral community'. We cannot rely on the notion of such a community in this context, as it is precisely the issue of who belongs to the moral community that is at stake. That is, since the pro-animal arguments precisely maintain that animals ought to be taken into consideration by the community that used to be restricted only to humans, mere reference to the existence of a human community is not enough. Everett's idea is that human vulnerability is subject to human assistance, but why can't we argue (as, for instance, Alasdair MacIntyre does) that vulnerability in general, no matter what the species in question, is a subject to such assistance (MacIntyre, 1999)?

However, Everett brings forward one significant difference between humans (and possibly domesticated animals), and wild animals: a human being can consciously expect help, and suffer mentally if the expectation is not met. This forms a difference. The rabbit or the elk does not expect our help, whereas other humans do. Members of a group that ventures to the forest would suffer from great fear and anxiety if they knew that in the event of an attack the others would eat their lunch instead of helping them from the jaws of a hungry wolf (Everett, 2001). Also, special relations add to the matter: we may have special obligations towards our close ones that do not apply to wild animals, and thus, we may save our dogs and mothers whereas we would leave the wild rabbits to face their deaths. Hence, the expectation of assistance and attachment draw a difference between humans and wild animals. Humans and dogs ought to be saved from the lions and wolves of this world, whereas antelopes and elk are not so lucky.

Hence, it can be argued that there are solutions to the argument from absurdity. We do not need to save the prey from predators, or leave human hikers to be eaten by wolves. However, this does not exhaust the discussion. In order to gain an insight into the argument, more attention needs to be placed on its background and relevance.

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BACKGROUND

One obvious source of absurdity in the context of pro-animal arguments is the manner in which these arguments go against anthropocentric meanings. To put it simply, from the anthropocentric viewpoint, it is absurd to suggest that animals should have rights. The role played by these background meanings is significant and requires more exploration. There are two issues that need to be taken into account: 1) particular anthropocentric assumptions, and 2) the relevance of cultural meanings on a more general level.

In regard to the first of these issues, the anthropocentric framework posits that one must choose either humans or animals – there is no middle option. Because of this, concern for animals is, at times, seen as a sign of disregard for human beings. An example of this is the accusation of misanthropy: if one argues for animal rights, one hates humans. A less extreme example is the accusation of anthropomorphism: if one argues for animal rights, one has mistaken animals for humans. Both of these are common in the context of the argument from absurdity. It is often stated that pro-animal arguments are absurd or ridiculous, for they require hatred of one's own species, or rest on Disney-like understandings of animals.[3] Of course, both also face significant problems, for they ignore the content of pro-animal arguments. It is precisely the categorical 'either – or' attitude that is being questioned by these arguments (*both* humans *and* animals should be taken into account, see Midgley, 1983), and this criticism is not answered by simply reaffirming the attitude. However, claims that repeat the competitive framework remain common, and are often used to support the argument from absurdity.

A more sophisticated version of such a claim suggests that pro-animal arguments would result in a considerable human loss. For instance, if we had positive duties towards animals in the case of natural events (such as floods or cold spells), we would face an impossible task, with some authors suggesting that we would have to resort to getting all animals medical insurance (Epstein, 2004, p. 153). The problem concerns not only actions but also omissions. We cannot avoid harming a certain number of animals with our everyday actions; even growing vegan food results in the deaths of countless insects.[4] Following pro-animal arguments would, quite simply, demand too much from us – it would have severe consequences from the viewpoint of human wellbeing. A related claim is that granting animals legal rights would, inside democracy, mean that human interests would be outweighed (Anderson, 2004). Therefore, concern for animals would again result in human loss.

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There are solutions to these problems. We are not expected to fulfil duties that are unreasonable in relation to our capacities. As implied above, Mary does not have to become a moral saint and rush to save every individual animal in the country: all that Mary has to do is act the best she can within her own limits.[5] Also, Mary does not have to give up growing vegetables, for there are factors other than basic value, interest equality, or rights that have to be taken into account. One obvious basis for decision-making is welfare-related 'necessity': if doing something is necessary for our basic welfare, we do not have to cease taking part in it (this claim gains many forms – for instance Angus Taylor refers to 'vital needs rights', which are accompanied by the 'interference principle': we have the right to fulfil vital needs, and can only interfere with the needs of others in order to secure this right) (Taylor, 1996; VanDeVeer, 1995). Since Mary does not live on water alone, she does not have to cease vegetable-growing, even if this means that animals may be involuntarily killed in the process. Thus, there are limits to both helping others and avoiding causing them harm. These limitations are widely accepted in intra-human ethics (for instance, the fact that human rights cannot always be respected to the full is not taken to mean that the whole notion is absurd), and it seems puzzling why they raise such interest in relation to animals.

Finally, many works in animal ethics include a shift in perspective that the argument from absurdity does not take into account. Rather than concentrating on liberty rights and power over other beings, we should concentrate on negative duties and respect towards those beings. This would ultimately cost us very little, as the pig would not be brought to the parliament – she would merely be taken out of the farm.[6] Animals are not given any power over humans, but rather the power used by humans is restricted. As Joan Dunayer claims: 'Nonhumans wouldn't share power. They would be shielded from *ours*.' (Dunayer, 2004, p. 119). This is highly important. The competitive framework does not make sense in the context of pro-animal arguments: the arguments are targeted against the hierarchical understanding of ethics, and thus reference to animal value or rights does not imply that humans will become secondary. That is, it is only inside anthropocentrism that we have to choose between humans or animals.

However, one can also argue for the relevance of anthropocentric meanings on a more general level. A claim brought forward by some Wittgensteinian philosophers is that given anthropocentric meanings are central to our language games, and thus we cannot escape them.

For instance, Raimond Gaita has maintained that the more radical claims of human-animal equality are a form of 'meaning-blindness', for they make

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no sense in relation to our language games (Gaita 2002). Gaita rests his views on the philosophy of Cora Diamond, who (despite her pro-animal sentiments, also shared by Gaita, and moral vegetarianism) claims that the 'Singer-Regan approach' in animal ethics, with its reliance on theory and logics, is misplaced, for we should rather look at basic human meanings. We do not treat humans in a special way because of theoretical considerations, but because 'humanity' as a meaning is based on the idea that humans have special value. Moreover, 'special value' may gain its meaning from humanity: we speak of 'values', because we recognise them in ourselves. Therefore, a certain amount of anthropocentrism is a part of the way in which we make the world meaningful. There is no need for further justification – in fact, looking for reasons runs the risk of losing meanings central to human life (Diamond 2004). The implication is that the more radical pro-animal arguments are absurd, because they go against the central meanings of the society. It does not matter whether we can find logical justifications for them, or whether we can find solutions to interest conflicts (see also Lynch and Wells 1998).

There are problems with this view, particularly in its more extreme form. Firstly, any normative account ought to come with a generous serving of justification: what is needed is moral reason and reflection, not mere descriptions of what form ethics tends to take, or what types of meanings we tend to follow. This becomes more obvious when considering another point of criticism. There are various competing meanings concerning the human-animal relationship, and hence an emphasis on one of these is a choice rather than an inevitability. Why should we concentrate on hierarchies and dualisms, when other types of understandings are also available, and (even when in the minority) form an equally elemental part of the manner in which we make sense of reality? Diamond is right to argue that we cannot step outside basic, cultural meanings (there is no categorical exit from the language games into which we are born), but what she ought to emphasise more explicitly is that there is plenty of choice within meanings, and that this choice can and should be reflected upon. It has to be added that she does bring this form of reflection to the fore in her discussion of persuading others to pay heed to 'fellow feelings' toward animals, but it remains lacking in the context of anthropocentrism. The danger in following the most common or popular of meanings is that we fall foul of merely accepting the status quo. Here the issue of relativism becomes obvious: would we also have to accept sexist values in a predominantly sexist society or racist values in a society that has rendered such values into basic meanings?

The Wittgensteinian stance is right to point out that we cannot ever achieve neutrality, and that hence it is hopeless to simply rely on the rules of logic

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and argumentation when trying to capture ethics. Therefore, animal ethics should put more emphasis on the influence and nature of the contemporary meanings. However, this should not be taken to mean that all that we can do is follow dominant meanings (an extreme version of the Wittgensteinian interpretation). The dichotomy between objectivity and cultural relativism restricts our view of other options. One of these is offered by Diamond herself, who argues that too often a type of 'perception' as a normative tool is forsaken. We 'deflect' to the land of logics and theory without actually perceiving, or becoming 'exposed' to, the animal standing in front of us or (a point emphasised by Diamond) the 'difficulty of reality' involved in trying to make sense of animal atrocities (Diamond, 2008).It can be argued that such perception avoids the neutrality-relativism dichotomy, for it avoids scepticism altogether. It makes no sense to ask whether the animal in front of me is really a sentient, thinking being, or a being of value. When we stop and listen, the animal herself will emerge. Animal ethics may do well to take this type of thinking into account even if it is plagued with a whole new set of epistemological questions. When people have been urged to stop, listen, and face the animal, to become exposed, they may not find the pro-animal arguments quite so ridiculous.

Therefore, the argument from absurdity often draws from anthropocentric background assumptions. Particularly, a competitive framework is often employed. However, these assumptions provide a poor basis for the argument. Firstly, even within the competitive framework, the inherent value, interest equality, or rights of non-human animals do not, by necessity, lead to absurd consequences.

Secondly, the competitive framework fails to take into account the main premises of the pro-animal arguments. Thirdly, even if anthropocentric assumptions are a part of our language games (and thus a factor that will affect ethics), they do not have monopoly over meaning – that is, there are other ways of perceiving animals, which do not support the argument from absurdity. Because of this, reference to anthropocentrism requires more justification: why should we favour the anthropocentric viewpoint instead of other, more inclusive views?

RELEVANCE

The argument from absurdity relies on the presumption that absurdity will, in itself, show us that a norm or a value is to be rejected. That is, absurd-

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ity is viewed as a moral reason. However, perhaps absurdity is not always relevant.

The argument from absurdity needs to be separated from *reductio ad absurdum* proper, as applied in formal logic: unlike the latter, the argument from absurdity does not necessarily seek to manifest that a contradiction can be derived from the premise(s) of an argument. Most commonly, the argument from absurdity, as presented in the context of animal ethics, refers to an oddity rather than an argumentative contradiction. Therefore, there is nothing absurd, in a strictly logical sense, to argue that animals have rights, even if these rights will imply great demands on human beings. Here absurdity is a matter of interpretation, and thus one can reject the argument by maintaining that one does not view the outcome to be absurd. Therefore, from a purely logical point of view, the argument from absurdity is by no necessity morally relevant. It is important to note that the argument is contingent: whether or not one views it to be relevant depends on the cultural context, personal opinion, and so forth.

Of course, even when the logical relevance is under doubt, the practical relevance remains significant. The argument brings forward the immensity of the practical consequences if moral notions emphasising equality were to be extended to non-human animals. Regardless of logic, this is a significant consideration for any moral view. Still, one needs to bear in mind that 'absurdity' also remains contingent in the context of practical relevance. Some will view the abandonment of animal industries as an absurdity, and others will welcome it with open arms. When discussing the argument from absurdity, it is important to pay heed to this contingency. We should be talking about the background assumptions (such as anthropocentrism) that make us think a given value is absurd, rather than the absurdity itself. That is, more attention needs to be placed on one simple question: Why does X seem absurd?

There is one persistent element behind the argument from absurdity that is rarely brought to the fore. Often, the argument includes a sense of comedy. A typical example is the claim that if cows have inherent value, then surely carrots are also to be given moral regard.[7] Hence, Carol Adams has suggested that the argument merely functions as a way to ridicule and side-track pro-animal arguments – its main emphasis is not in its content, but in trivialisation (Adams 1990). Trying to answer the argument from absurdity may, because of this reason, be counter-productive as one ends up discussing the possible rights of plants instead of the rights of animals, and therefore becomes an unwitting source of comedy. The point made by Adams is political. She is concerned with the motives behind the argument,

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rather than the content of it. From a philosophical viewpoint the argument from absurdity deserves serious attention, regardless of the background intentions. However, one could claim that the humoristic element, at times integral to specific versions of the argument, is itself a moral statement.

Philosophy has mapped out (amongst others) two explanations for humour: 'the superiority theory', according to which humour stems from feelings of superiority, and 'the incongruity theory', according to which humour is born out of oddity and ambiguity. Charles Baudelaire has offered an example of the former, as he has argued that laughter signifies a sense of dominance over other beings (Baudelaire, 1991). Henri Bergson offers an example of the latter, arguing that, for instance, rendering a human being into a machine or an animal is a source of humour (Bergson, 2007). What is crucial from the viewpoint of animal ethics is that in both explanations, normative elements can be obvious, as humour sets boundaries between what is seen to be valuable and what is not. That is, humour based on superiority and incongruity may re-establish the belief in human superiority and categorical distinctions between species: it may affirm and construct ethics.

It is important to consider the role played by humour. The claim that non-human animals should have moral or legal rights sounds comical both because animals are seen to be in a different moral category (and thus could never have such rights), and because the claim breaks the moral hierarchy between humans and other animals (and thus brings animals to a level where they do not belong). This combination is powerful, and the argument from absurdity often makes use of it. It brings these contradictions to the fore, and by doing so re-affirms the underlying dualism and hierarchies. That is, by making the breaking of anthropocentric categories seem comical, the argument re-establishes those categories. When Mary points out how funny it would be if cows were given rights, she is bringing forward the notion that cows cannot have rights.

Humour is a form of rhetoric. It is about persuasion. This is where the argument from absurdity gains much of its strength. Although many versions of the argument bring forward serious moral issues, there is often a sense of comedy revolving around the argument, which renders it more persuasive. Animal ethics would do well to better take into account the rhetoric involved. Often, animal ethics concentrates solely on the content of arguments, without considering the way in which those arguments are delivered and received (a matter that Diamond has to some extent brought forward in her emphasis on 'persuasion'). This is a significant oversight, as arguably many people do not pay heed to pro-animal arguments precisely because of the power of rhetoric: the arguments are not seductive. Perhaps pro-animal arguments

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could also make use of rhetoric, even humour. Humour does not arise only from superiority and congruity, but also from recognising one's own habits (laughing at oneself). Arguably, anthropocentrism (together with practices such as meat-eating) is one of the most fundamental habits of many human beings. Highlighting the manner in which this habit is often followed without due reflection may lead us to ponder more on the relationships we share with other animals.

CONCLUSION

The argument from absurdity, as presented in the context of inter-species interest conflicts, faces severe difficulties.

Firstly, there are possible solutions to inter-species interest conflicts, even if animals were to have, for instance, moral rights. The farmer could still harvest his field, we could make choices between oysters and whales, and the human hiker could be saved from the wolf. Secondly, the anthropocentric beliefs, which tend to form the background for the argument, pose a problem. They assume a competitive framework, within which we have to choose either humans or animals, but fail to offer support for this framework. Finally, the relevance of the argument remains unclear. 'Absurdity' is always contingent: what we understand to be absurd depends on our viewpoint. Here humour plays an important part: as a rhetorical tool, it constructs ethics. This is something that is often ignored. Although the argument (at least in the form discussed here) is not philosophically sound, its political and rhetorical power ought to be fully recognised and reckoned with.

NOTES

[1] It also has to be noted that the argument tends to conflate extreme decisions with general moral norms: in extreme circumstances we may have to make decisions that cannot be made the basis of general moral norms (Pluhar, 1995; Sapontzis, 1987). Again, the same also applies to intra-human conflicts: favouring one human being instead of another in an extreme situation will not, by necessity, imply that the one has greater value than the other.

[2] There are further criticisms related to the dichotomy between individualism and holism. Warwick Fox (2006) has claimed that the emphasis on individuality, present in the majority of pro-animal arguments, prevents us from giving adequate value to matters such as ecology and biodiversity. The contextuality of animals is set aside: only the individual, rather than the context in which she exists, is given

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moral significance. Therefore, the pro-animal arguments will fail to pay heed to the sentiment that there is something more valuable in a wild animal of a given species, or a wild animal population, than an individual pet (Fox 2006). Fox is rightly touching upon the complicated interface between animal liberation/rights and environmental viewpoints. However, emphasis on individuality need not be entirely blind to environmental considerations. One argument is that the ramifications and context in which a being exists need to be acknowledged, but that the value of that being cannot be reduced to or correlated with those ramifications and context – hence, biodiversity or species are not without relevance, even when sentience and individuality are prioritised.

[3] As a rather heated example, see Derr, 1992; as a study, see Cartmill, 1993.

[4] This point is made not only by Mary Ann Warren (1997), but also by Ted Kerasote (1994), who attacks 'supermarket vegetarianism' and argues that hunting would result in fewer deaths. However, since sustenance hunting is possible only in a very limited sense, the choice would be between 'supermarket meat-eating' and vegetarianism, out of which the former leads to far more suffering due to pollution, growing feed for the animals (the argument often forgets that much more grain has to be grown in order to produce meat than to ensure nutrition for vegetarians), etc. Moreover, if hunting was brought to a larger scale by radical maximisation of populations, this too would lead to not only much death, but also much suffering, as eventually prey animals would simply replace farm animals in numbers, thereby radically diminishing ecosystems and the welfare of each individual. See also Taylor 2003.

[5] It should be emphasised that an inability to completely fulfil moral values and norms does not mean that such values and norms should not be held to begin with. As Sapontzis argues: 'That a condition is one that we cannot attain does not disqualify it from being a useful moral ideal for us' (Sapontzis, 1987, p. 237).

[6] But surely we need to keep farming, so that cows get to live? There is a paradox at play in this familiar version of the argument from absurdity ('It would be absurd that there would be no more cows and pigs, and thus animal industries must be maintained'). The individual value of animals is 'maintained' by systematically violating that same value. Whereas in relation to humans, preserving life is of great importance, in relation to animals, the value of life justifies killing. However, no cow life at all is better than a cow life inherently exploited.

[7] See again Derr (1992), who argues that because of this animal rights leads to the 'plant liberation movement', and so becomes 'the object for disdainful laughter'. See also, for example, Austad, 1999.

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