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The Chicken and the Bath Water: Exploring a Basic Limit to the Vegetarian Ideal

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Abstract

Critics of the animal rights movement often point out that a perfectly vegetarian world would result in a drastic reduction of the number of farm animals. This article is the first to systematically analysis the merits of this objection. The article provides several alternative ways of naming the objection, including "the animal elimination problem," "the carnivore's claim," and "the chicken and the bathwater dilemma." It also compares the animal elimination problem to the goal of humane societies to spay and neuter companion animals. The ways in which the animal welfare movement avoids this problem by substituting compassion for rights is also explored. A potentially fatal flaw of the "animal elimination" objection is the difficulty of talking about future or theoretical entities. Can animals not yet born have rights? Moreover, does it make sense to say that animals born into suffering might wish to never have been born? Several hypothetical scenarios are developed to address these questions. The author argues that the animal elimination problem does stall on the puzzle of assigning interests to hypothetical animals, yet there is a moral intuition about our relationship to the future that is worth considering. On secular grounds, there are no strong reasons to claim that we have duties to animals not yet existing, but Christian theology complicates the picture. The article ends with an exploration of the commands in Genesis to both humans and nonhuman animals to procreate and fill the world. The author concludes that Christians do have a duty to bring future animals into existence if they can do so within moral limits prescribed by the Genesis narrative itself.

Keywords

animal rights, animal welfare, theology of animals, vegetarianism, stewardship, cruelty to animals, farm animals

Imagine, if you will, that animal rights activists ruled the world. That hardly seems likely to happen any time soon, but if they did succeed in turning their message into mandatory global policy, what would happen to all the farm animals that we raise for food and other products? I think the answer to that question is obvious. Except for a few environmentally friendly and open range livestock sanctuaries (and an upswing in pigs kept as pets), the citizens of Veggie Earth

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would witness a dramatic decrease in the number of livestock. In the name of helping animals, animal rights activists would succeed in creating a world that brings far fewer animals into existence. This would probably be an unintended consequence of this vegetarian utopia, but a consequence nonetheless. The question is, how do we evaluate a world free (for the most part) of farm animals? This world would be morally better for us (we would eat better and be responsible for far less suffering), but would it be morally better for farm animals?

On the face of it, that question is highly speculative, both because it is extremely unlikely that the world will ever be run by animal rights activists and because animal rights activists do not agree among themselves about the kinds of rights that animals possess. The whole scenario, in fact, seems like nothing more than a vegetarian fantasy (or perhaps a carnivore's nightmare). Nonetheless, as I hope to show in this essay, something like this scenario lurks behind some of the most important criticisms of the animal rights movement. Regardless of whether this scenario is even remotely possible, it is theoretically possible, which suggest that the animal rights movement has what I call an "animal elimination problem." This problem is not undefeatable or insuperable, but it still needs to be addressed, if only because it has an intuitive appeal.

That intuitive appeal is easy to spell out. When we help other people, we want them to be better, in some way, than they already are, and that goes for our relationship with nonhuman animals as well. True, we sometimes resort to euthanasia when someone, human or nonhuman animal, is suffering with little life left, but in ordinary circumstances we think that eliminating a life is a sign that our help has failed, not succeeded. That animals suffer in factory farms is a fact, but the best strategies for reducing that suffering are much contested. An ethical strategy that helps animals by reducing their overall number has the burden of demonstrating that it is not possible to improve their lot without such drastic consequences.

I have another, more colorful name for the "future animal elimination problem," which is derived from the idiomatic expression, "Don't throw the baby out with the bathwater." Throwing the baby out with the bathwater is a vivid way of saying that you should not unintentionally discard something of value when you are getting rid of something you don't want. In order to apply this catchphrase to our context, I have altered it to "Don't throw the chicken out with the bathwater." Animal rightists who reject the infliction of any pain or suffering on animals are in danger of throwing out the chicken (and other farm animals) along with the dirty water of human cruelty.

To avoid getting rid of the chicken, animal rightists need an effective way of drawing a line between the chicken and the dirty bathwater. To see this point it is helpful to distinguish between animal rightists and animal welfarists. Animal welfarists work for better treatment of animals while accepting, in principle and within certain limits, their relative subordination to human interests. The animal welfare movement is based more on compassion than rights and is committed to reform, not revolution, in animal-related social practices. Animal rightists, by contrast, argue that nonhuman animals have rights roughly equivalent to the rights humans have, which means that animals should not be harmed or killed except, perhaps, in life-threatening situations. Of course, this rather dualistic distinction gets blurred in real life (rights and compassion can fit together quite neatly), but that is precisely why it is useful to turn to an imaginary scenario in order to discern divergent assumptions and goals among the various groups working toward a more ethical treatment of animals.

The connection between animal eliminationism and the animal rights movement can be seen more clearly by putting it into a formulaic proposition: The more rights a nonhuman animal has, the less justification there is for humans to exercise any control over that animal. Countless domesticated animals exist, however, only because humans control their lives. The

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fullest enforcement of animal rights, therefore, will save currently existing animals from suffering only at the expense of causing countless future animals to not exist at all. The proposition thus leads to a dilemma: The greater the rights, the fewer the animals. Or, to return to our catchphrase, animal rightists want to get rid of not just the bathwater but everything the bathwater has touched, since they do not think the bathwater can be salvaged. Thus, the tub has to be made empty before it can be cleaned.

One immediate reply animal rightists can make to "the chicken and the bathwater" problem is to compare it to the spaying and neutering of companion animals. The overpopulation of stray cats and dogs forces shelters to put down millions of these animals every year. Humane Societies believe that every pet deserves a loving home, but abandonment and overbreeding makes that impossible. The most workable solution to this problem is to spay and neuter as many pets as possible while promoting adoption from shelters. If successfully implemented, this strategy would result in far fewer companion animals than presently exist, and yet nobody thinks this is a bad thing. Indeed, animal welfare groups that endorse this strategy are universally praised, so why is animal eliminationism thought to be such a bad thing?

On the face of it, the welfare campaign for spaying and neutering appears to create a situation that is similar to the animal elimination problem for animal rights. In both cases, humans caused the problem in the first place (through irresponsible pet ownership in the first case and carnivorous diets in the second), and the solution involves only mild discomfort (through surgery for pets) and the loss of future pleasures (from altered diets for humans). The result is also basically the same. A world where spaying and neutering is enforced would be a world with far fewer companion animals, just as a vegetarian utopian would have far fewer farm animals.

The differences, however, are crucial. First, the difference in numbers is significant. In the world of complete spaying and neutering, there would still be plenty of cats and dogs. The human relationship to companion animals would stay the same (and probably improve). In the world of the animal rights philosopher king, there would be very few farm animals. The human relation to a whole set of animals would be fundamentally altered.

Second, the future dogs and cats that spaying and neutering would eliminate would be animals that would have been forced to live in ways that cut against their nature. Cats and dogs are not bred to live in the wild. The animals eliminated by vegetarianism are of a different sort. Farm animals are bred to be submissive to human authority and control. The future farm animals that vegetarianism would eliminate would, if treated decently, not be animals forced to live in ways that cut against their nature.

Third, the difference in strategies is also important. People control the lives of pets and farm animals. That control should be exercised in moral ways. Proper authority over companion animals will result in fewer of them being set loose to overbreed and turn semi-feral. Proper authority over farm animals would lead not to fewer of them but to a better treatment of them. This is where the analogy between the two cases breaks down. The vegetarian world is closer not to a world of spaying and neutering but a world where people have given up petkeeping practices altogether. There are animal rights theorists who reject petkeeping as a morally justifiable practice, but this is a minority position. Most people can be persuaded to cut down on their meat eating, but the idea that they should not keep pets as a matter of principle is another matter altogether. Perhaps the reason for this is that improving one's diet (even by omitting certain food items, like meat) is an indication of a healthy lifestyle, but giving up a companion animal is associated with stress, trauma, and mourning.

So far, I have been speaking hypothetically, so it might be useful to bring the discussion down to real life arguments. That the animal elimination problem is not purely hypothetical can be demonstrated by what I call "the carnivore's claim." The carnivore's claim is, I suspect, fairly

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common, since I have experienced it several times and I have heard similar stories from other vegetarians. It often comes in the form of a snide comment meat-eaters make to vegetarians. "Hey, if I weren't eating this hamburger, that cow wouldn't have been alive for you to complain about or for it to have a bad life. That cow's lucky I ordered this sandwich!" While this sentiment is often expressed half-heartedly, and whether or not it is made in good faith, it does contain a serious point and thus needs a careful response. If humans did not eat animals, those animals would not have been brought into existence to meet that consumer demand. Meat-eaters, from this point of view, can congratulate themselves for causing more animals to be born than otherwise would have been the case.

Can carnivores really take credit for creating a world where hundreds of millions of animals have had the benefit of being alive that would not otherwise have existed? The most common vegetarian response to this claim is that most of these animals live in such frightening conditions that they surely wish they had never been born at all. In other words, if the carnivore could talk to the animal that their purchasing habits had caused to be brought into the world, the animal would say, "No thanks." Carnivores should expect no gratitude from their victims. On the contrary, vegetarians are the true benefactors of animals by preventing them from living a life of unmitigated pain and suffering.

By making this response, vegetarians are asking us to believe that factory farmed animals would, if they knew German, agree with the oft-quoted lines of the Romantic poet Heinrich Heine, who wrote, "Sleep is lovely, death is better still, not to have been born is of course the miracle." Life is sometimes unworthy for humans, with all of our resources and abilities to make it more interesting, so why wouldn't life appear unworthy for the hundreds of millions of animals raised in inhumane conditions for the sole purpose of becoming our dinner? We would not want to be treated that way, so why should they? Indeed, if animal experience is immersed in immediate ways in the physical sensations of pleasure and pain, and thus they are unable to turn their suffering into something meaningful (and potentially pleasurable), then wouldn't they wish they had never been born if their pain outweighed their pleasure? In other words, if they could recite poetry, wouldn't Heine's poem be their favorite?

The "better to not have been born" response, unfortunately, does not defeat the carnivore's claim, no matter how speciously that claim is made. There are two problems with this response. First, when we try to imagine how animals perceive the world, we risk projecting our own feelings onto their situation. Indeed, it is precisely our imagination that permits us to experience through them what they cannot experience for themselves. We would not want to live like a chicken in a crate, but that is because we know what it is like not to live in a crate. Can chickens imagine what they do not know? That is an important question because it takes a great effort of the imagination to wish one's life to have been radically different than it is. Certainly, chickens know they do not want to live in a crate, but do they know they have any alternative? It seems to me that they cannot imagine how things could have been differently, and so they cannot mourn over the what life could have been.

Second, all animals have an innate and powerful drive to live. Humans can reflect on the value of that drive and conclude that life is not worth it, but even in humans, suicidal despair is the exception, not the rule. Animals are closer to the instinct of self-preservation than humans are. We can imagine animals not wanting to be born, but they cannot imagine not being alive. A living animal wants to do just that—go on living, regardless of their pain to pleasure ratio. True, many animals have a visceral knowledge of when they are going to die, and they sometimes seek out a place for just that purpose, but there is no reason to think that farm animals know that their death is imminent. Their deaths in abattoirs can be horrendous, but that experience could define their entire existence only if they had a foreknowledge of it and the ability to anticipate it through the imagination.

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There is a better response to the carnivore's claim, and I have saved it until now due to its conceptual complexity. This response is based on the consideration that the scenario of triumphant vegetarianism would not result in the immediate elimination of existing farm animals. Presumably, there would be a transition period, and these animals would be permitted to grow to old age and die a natural death. What the animal rights rulers would eliminate, if given the chance, are *future* generations of those animals. A more precise name for this problem, therefore, would be "future animal eliminationism." It is one thing to say that alleviating suffering should not eliminate animals, but how do we judge the value of future animal lives? Is that even possible?

Indeed, there is something fundamentally fishy about the idea of arguing about future living beings, and the difficulty goes beyond the difficulties of predicting and picturing the future. Bluntly put, how can we measure the value of something that does not exist? We can use the words "an animal not yet born," but that does not mean that those words actually refer to anything. More pointedly, future living beings are hypothetical constructions, and hypothetical constructions cannot have real interests. Only living beings can have interests. Something that does not exist cannot complain about not being brought into existence. Accordingly, it does not matter if we create a world where there are few farm animals, because the missing animals never existed in order to be missed by anybody.

For some people, this objection will settle the debate. I am not so sure. Although arguing about hypothetical futures and non-existent entities raises enough conundrums to drive even the most speculative philosopher mad, imaginative stories can still help us to clarify our own moral intuitions. Perhaps it would be helpful, then, to try to isolate the moral intuition behind the "future animal elimination" problem by creating a clearer scenario. Imagine two possible future worlds. In World 1, billions of farm animals exist, with most of them living in less than humane conditions. In World 2, a few hundred farm animals exist, and most of them live in good conditions. Can we say that one of these worlds is a better world *for farm animals* than the other? A skeptic will immediately say that comparing these worlds is like comparing non-existent apples with non-existent oranges. Perhaps so, but this scenario forces us to be very specific about what moral calculus we can use to make this comparison—and whether these moral calculations have any value.

I can think of two ways of comparing these worlds. First, we could appeal to the interests of a single, hypothetical agent. That is, we can imagine a farm animal alive today being given the choice of joining one of these worlds. In that case, the choice would be obvious. What animal would not want to live in World 2 over World 1? This way of putting the choice, however, is too easy. The choice should take into account the fact that there are far fewer slots available to any animal in World 2. So what if the farm animal were told that if she chooses World 1, she will likely end up there, but if she chooses World 2, she will most likely end up not existing at all (with a very small chance of ending up there)? What choice would she make then? I don't know how to answer this question, but it is not at all obvious to me that the animal would not choose World 1.

The problem with this argument is that it is hard (and perhaps nearly impossible) to talk about animal interests in the abstract. Even if we imagine a living animal today making this choice, that living animal is actually only a theoretical construction, and, as I argued above, theoretical constructs do not have interests. Any interests our animal has, then, will be of our own choosing and thus will reflect the interests of the person making the argument. What kind of risks would this animal be willing to take? What would its fears and hopes be? How would it measure the relative values of pain and pleasure? All of these questions collapse into a miasma of sheer speculation.

Perhaps the second way of comparing World 1 and World 2 holds more promise. This moral calculus is based on the idea that each and

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every animal possesses inherent value. In that case, World 1 seems to be the obviously better choice. The more animals there are, the better the world is.

Unfortunately, the formula of "the more animals, the better the world," taken to an extreme, leads to absurd consequences. If more animals are always better than fewer animals, then we should keep breeding animals regardless of their standards of living (or even their usefulness). That would be a nightmare for the animals and a foolish use of resources for us. The fact that a position can be reduced to a *reductio ad absurdum*, of course, does not necessarily mean that it is a bad position. Almost any good idea or practice can be shown to be bad when it is reformulated in increasingly extreme terms. Nevertheless, "more is not always better" is also a useful formula, and we could probably come up with even more maxims and sayings to complicate the "more is better" idea. Obviously, no single formula can provide enough moral weight to validate a choice between World 1 and World 2.

In the end, the question of how we can weigh the value of future animal life and whether this should be a factor in our consideration of animal rights just might be moot. Philosophical analysis of what we owe to future generations of animals is just too fraught with conceptual dead ends and analytical quandaries to be of much use as a guide to moral thinking about diet and compassion. This, however, is where the theological perspective becomes fundamentally important. On secular grounds, it is hard to imagine why humans would have a duty toward non-existent entities or how the future could have any ontological reality. From a religious perspective, these questions take on a whole new meaning.

The future might not be real to us, but it is real to God. God's relation to time is a notoriously thorny metaphysical issue, but the consensus of classical theism is that God is present to all moments of time, past, present and future. That God is eternal means that God stands outside of time in order to be fully intimate with any moment in time. The future, then, is as real to God as the present is to us. This does not mean that we can see the future, but it should suggest that the future has a reality that surpasses our limited relation to time. Christians, it follows, cannot simply dismiss discussions about the future as simply speculative.

Christianity too promotes beliefs and practices that transcend the limits of time. Christians remember the dead and include them in their prayers, just as they hope for redemption of the entire world in the end times. The Church is the body of Christ, which unites all Christians, including those not yet born. The doctrine of providence teaches Christians to be confident about the future because God is already there, directing all of history to its consummation in Jesus Christ. Most concretely and practically, theologians are becoming more sensitive to the idea that the goodness of the earth, grounded in God's love for his creation, means that we have a duty to future generations to be sensitive to the environment. So if Christians have a duty to future generations of human beings, why can't Christians have a duty to future generations of nonhuman animals?

The most obvious place in the Bible that addresses our duty to future generations is the commandment in Genesis: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it" (Gen. 1:28; NRSV). This verse connects procreation to a uniquely human purpose or mission. We are to fill the earth, presumably in order to subdue it. I will return to what subdue means in a moment, but for now I want to point out that having a mission means that that our obligation to bring other people into existence holds regardless of their potential happiness. The point of existence is not the balance of our pleasure and pain but the fulfillment of our destiny in relation to God and to others. In other words, humans are to procreate regardless of their happiness, because they have a mission to fulfill. That mission requires freedom and rationality, and thus humans are able to see their suffering in a broader context than the comparative calculation of pleasure and pain. Biblical

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religion gives life a goal that helps humans to make sense of suffering in ways that non-human animals cannot.

Although animals do not need a directive from God to inspire them to procreate, God does give a similar commandment to the birds and the fishes, namely, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let the birds multiply on earth" (Gen. 1:22). (It might be significant that the birds and the fishes are commanded to multiply but not the land animals, which could compete with humans for shelter and sustenance.) Humans are to fill the earth to subdue it, but why are animals asked to fill the earth? Do they too have a mission? The clue to answering that question lies in the fact that God calls all of the animals good and places no limitation on their procreation. The lives of animals, Genesis seems to be saying, are good in and of themselves. That goodness, arguably, *is* the moral mission they are given to fulfill. Animals love life and seek more of it, and the likelihood that they cannot make conscious and reflective meaning of their lives like us does not detract from the inherent value of their joy in the sheer act of existing.

Humans and animals both have a duty to procreate future generations, but is there a relationship between these two duties? Can our duty to procreate serve as the ground of a duty to bring animals into existence? On the face of it, there seems to be no connection between the two commandments. In the perfect world of Eden, there was plenty of room, evidently, for everyone. Moreover, when animals multiplied in the Garden of Eden, they did so without threat of predation, hunger, and even, according to some theological traditions, death. Yet even in a situation of abundant resources and the absence of evil, human and animal existence were tied closely together. After all, Adam names the animals, and humans are prohibited from eating them. Still, there was no need, in Eden, for humans to think about any possible duty toward animals in the future.

The perfection of Eden, of course, did not last. After the fall, humans are condemned to suffer in their relationships to each other, the land, and other animals, but they are also given the opportunity to transform their material conditions through work and love. Nature does not yield her resources easily, so humanity's relationship to the world will be one of struggle and hardship, but must that labor take the form of domination? Dominion language has been used in the past to justify unlimited human freedom to plunder, exploit, and manipulate the natural world. Thus, the commandment to procreate was taken to mean that people can also control the procreation of animals for their own purposes. When the story in Genesis is read carefully, however, it does not warrant rapacious and gluttonous human behavior. Indeed, our desire to dominate the world has sown the seeds of our own destruction. Stewardship is the original meaning of the human mission given in Genesis, and it is the only meaning that makes any sense of our relationship to the future of the earth. Stewardship means not abandoning the world to its own devices but transforming human power over the world into compassionate and accountable authority. Domination is a relationship between humans in the present, but stewardship is a relationship we have with the future. Stewards take the future as seriously as what is happening here and now.

So how can we best be stewards of the future of farm animals? What I am proposing might be best seen in reference to one final scenario. Imagine that domesticated animals are brought into existence in a controlled environment that has all the amenities of a natural habitat without any of its dangers and risks. These animals live peacefully with each other and humans, enjoying their lives in accordance with their biological needs. Near the end of their lives, they are humanely euthanized and then eaten. The principle harm we humans would have done to them is to shorten their lives, but since they are not able to imagine the distant future, that harm seems pretty minimal. We have denied them future pleasures, but we have also given them what life they have had, and we have given them life only because we intended to eat them.

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We brought them into being, protected them from predators, fed them, and killed them. Would they rather have not existed at all?

I can imagine several objections to this scenario. First, if bringing them into existence is so good, shouldn't we bring them into existence just for the sheer joy of it? After all, that is what God did, according to Genesis. In other words, why kill and eat them? On a practical level, there is an obvious response to this objection. Given scarce resources, if we bring into existence billions of animals that consume large quantities of food without turning them into food, we will inevitably cause great harm to other humans and, eventually, to these animals themselves, since their subsistence will soon prove to be too costly. There is no way to raise a large number of animals in a sustainable manner without consuming them at some point in the process.

On a theoretical level, we do not have an obligation to do everything that is good, nor do we have an obligation to do a particular thing just because it is good. Thus, we do not have a duty to cause animals to exist solely for the reason that they would enjoy their existence. However, we do have a duty, should we cause animals to exist, to ensure that their existence is not so contrary to their natures that they live with more pain than pleasure. If we can do that, then it is permissible to cause animals to exist, since we are causing beings to exist that will enjoy their existence. The permissible becomes the desirable when these animals are used for food. Furthermore, the permissible becomes a duty if it can be shown that eating the animals we have caused to exist is necessary for the best use of nature's resources and thus the sustenance of both humans and the farm animals themselves.

Second, if we have a duty to bring animals into existence in such a way that they will not lead lives of suffering but will benefit us, then why not follow genetic developments to their scientific conclusion and design animals that feel nothing at all? Such designs are already in the works and could take much of the steam out of the vegetarian movement. If vegetarians focus on minimizing human inflicted harm to non-human animals, then it will be hard, if not impossible, to find reasons for preventing the genetic creation of non-harmable meat machines. Animal rightists, in fact, often argue that it is impossible to raise animals in such a way that we cause them no pain. Animal rightists are thus committed, it seems to me, to the following argument: If we have a duty to ensure that the animals we cause to exist feel no pain, and if it is impossible to raise animals in a painless way, then it follows that we should, if we can benefit from it, cause animals to exist that feel nothing. That, however, is exactly the same consequence of animal eliminationism. Meat machines bring us right back to our original problem.

Third, isn't it idealistic to think that factory farms can be eliminated and domesticated animals raised in relatively peaceful conditions? Certainly the cost of meat would be quite high, but then again, sustainable ecosystems will be more in demand in the future as the environmental costs of factory farming become more evident. Perhaps the market itself will lead in this direction by driving up the price of meat as the human population grows and land and water resources become scarcer. If meat becomes a luxury one day for only the wealthy few or a treat that is consumed sparingly, then raising animals in genuinely compassionate conditions might not seem so odd. Besides, the ideal of eating only animals that have been well raised is no more utopian, and probably quite a bit less so, than the vegetarian ideal of eliminating all human-inflicted animal suffering by changing everyone's dietary habits.

In sum, I have tried to show that, on theological grounds, we have a duty to create a world that brings many animals into existence if and only if those animals are treated in a humane manner. We also have a duty to avoid replacing these animals with meat machines that would render these animals, for all practical purposes, non-existent. By grounding our duty to future animals in compassionate agricultural practices and avoiding any practices that might result in what I have called the problem of future animal elimination, we can succeed in throwing out the bathwater while saving the chicken.

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