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EATING ANIMALS AND THE MORAL VALUE OF NON-HUMAN SUFFERING

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Winners of the first prize of the 2012 essay competition for students
sponsored by the *Gesellschaft für Analytische Philosophie* (GAP)
in cooperation with the *Grazer Philosophische Studien**

Summary

The purpose of this article, which takes the form of a dialogue between a vegetarian and a meat eater, is twofold. On the one hand, we argue for a general characterisation of moral value in terms of well-being and suffering. On the other hand, on the basis of this characterisation, we argue that, in most cases, the moral value attached to the choice of eating meat is negative; in particular, we defend this claim against a number of objections concerning the nature of animal suffering, its moral value, and the moral responsibility of meat eaters.

“When we lift our forks, we hang our hats somewhere”
(Foer, 2009, 132)

*“The question is not, Can they reason?
nor, Can they talk? but, Can they suffer?”*
(Bentham, 1789, chapter XVII)

We face moral dilemmas almost every day. We attribute a moral value to a lot of our actions but, surprisingly, one of the most common ones, namely eating animals, seems to remain largely outside the moral sphere.

* The question of the 2012 competition was: “Are we allowed to eat animals?” From the 53 submissions that conformed to the rules of the competition, the jury selected three, one each for the first, second, and third prize. The authors of the prizewinning essays were permitted to slightly revise and expand their submission for publication.

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In what follows, Mechoui, a meat eater, and Kardamon, a vegetarian, discuss the question of eating animals from a moral point of view.

Mechoui: These cheeseburgers are really delicious; are you sure you do not want one?

Kardamon: I am sure they taste good; but I am also quite sure that eating animals is morally problematic, to say the least.

Mechoui: And apparently you even think that it is bad. How would you defend this position?

Kardamon: We could start from the generally accepted idea that suffering is bad (i.e. has a negative moral value) and that well-being is good (i.e. has a positive moral value). On that basis, we could characterise a good behaviour as one which improves the state of someone (towards more well-being or less suffering), and a bad behaviour as one that worsens the state of someone (towards less well-being or more suffering).

Mechoui: You are talking about individuals suffering, but some of the individuals that are relevant to our moral question are animals (more precisely, non-human animals). It is not obvious that animals suffer in the same way as humans, or even that they suffer at all (see e.g. Descartes 1637, part V; Nagel 1974; Wittgenstein 1953, 174).

Kardamon: Animal suffering is indeed a controversial issue. Let us first consider the claim that animals do not suffer at all. It seems that a necessary and sufficient condition for being able to suffer is to be a sentient being, and that a necessary and sufficient condition for being a sentient being is to be equipped with a sufficiently developed nervous system. Thus, since at least some animals meet this condition, at least some animals can suffer.

Mechoui: What you are saying suggests not only that at least certain animals can suffer, but also that other individuals, like plants, cannot suffer.

Kardamon: Exactly. And this is why, for instance, it is not incoherent to choose not to eat animals on ethical grounds, while still eating vegetables.

Let us now consider the claim that animals can suffer, but not in the same way as we do. People who endorse this position seem to suggest that there is

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something more in human suffering. Human suffering does not seem to be completely reducible to physical suffering (such as mere physical pain, stress, fear), since humans also have the capacity to reason about their suffering, which can give rise to additional factors of suffering (such as shame, indignation, or the awareness of possible consequences).

However, the capacity to reason does not *necessarily* give rise to such additional factors of suffering. In certain cases, it can even give rise to factors of *well-being*. Imagine that you and your friend, who happens to be a panda, are getting a tattoo. During the process, you both experience physical suffering; however, unlike your friend, you are very happy to get a tattoo and thinking about how great it will be to have it, and this positive psychological state will probably be a factor of well-being, resulting in a global improvement in your condition.

Most importantly, the fact that the capacity to reason does not necessarily give rise to additional factors of suffering means that human suffering can be pure physical suffering. Hence, the fact that animal suffering is only physical is not in itself a good reason to conclude that animals cannot suffer in the same way as we do.

Mechoui: I agree, but there may be another, better reason to conclude that animals do not suffer in the same way as we do: our physical suffering itself may be more intense than their physical suffering. Since having a nervous system which is sufficiently developed for suffering *tout court* does not entail having a nervous system which is sufficiently developed for suffering *as intensely as* human beings do, it could well be that even animals equipped with the most developed nervous system suffer less intensely than we do. In fact, the link that you have established between the capacity to suffer and the nervous system provides us with a positive reason to think that animals suffer less than we do: their nervous system is probably less developed than ours.

Kardamon: It might be that considering the development of the nervous system leads us to conclude that animals suffer less than we do. However, there is another reason to think that animals suffer; and it is also a reason to think that they suffer as intensely as we do. Humans have usual ways of expressing physical suffering. Similar behaviours can be observed in animals, which strongly suggests that animals suffer: if we consider such behaviours as a sufficient basis to conclude that humans suffer, it seems that there is no reason not to draw the same conclusion in the case of animals (Singer 2010, 26). Moreover, this kind of behaviour seems similar in humans and animals also with respect to intensity, which suggests that animals and humans suffer with similar intensity.

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Mechoui: So let us assume that animals' physical suffering is similar to ours. We could nonetheless attribute a lower moral value, or even no moral value at all, to their suffering.

Kardamon: But what would be the basis for making such a moral difference? You surely do not want to suggest that a difference in moral treatment can be justified by a mere difference in physical aspect—as most racists and sexists have claimed.

Mechoui: Clearly not. Racists and sexists claimed that (a) visible biological differences are a sign of difference in intellectual capacities, and that (b) a difference in intellectual capacities justifies a difference in moral treatment. They were obviously wrong about (a), and thus their conclusions were not justified by this argument. But in the case of animals, (a) is true: it is uncontroversial that animals are less intelligent. So if we accept (b), this argument allows us to attribute a lower moral value to animals.

Kardamon: But (b) is obviously wrong: if we accepted (b), we would be justified in attributing a lower moral value to mentally handicapped people and babies, and this clearly is a counterintuitive conclusion.

Mechoui: All right. But even if the difference in intelligence is not a good justification, there may be another one. It seems that our moral duties depend on a principle of reciprocity: we intuitively think that we can have moral duties towards all and only the individuals who can have moral duties towards us. And it seems clear that animals cannot have moral duties towards us.

Kardamon: Reciprocity can seem to be a good criterion for determining the objects of our moral duties: the majority of the entities towards which we do not seem to have any moral duty happen not to have any moral duty towards us either. For instance, very few people would consider themselves as having moral duties towards umbrellas or forks. However, it seems that the absence of reciprocity cannot be the reason why we do not consider ourselves as morally committed in such cases. Babies do not have any moral duties towards us; if the absence of reciprocity were a sufficient reason for not being morally committed, we would have to conclude that we do not have moral duties towards babies.

Moreover, if we considered that moral duties have to be reciprocal, it would be quite natural to consider that moral rights have to be reciprocal as well. But if moral rights indeed had to be reciprocal, then you could not claim—as you or other people eating meat would like to—both that animals do not have any moral

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rights over us and that we, on the contrary, have certain moral rights over them, such as the right to force them to live in captivity or to kill them and eat them.

Mechoui: But I am not claiming that animals do not have the same rights over us. For instance, animals do have the right to kill us and eat us, if they can.

Kardamon: As you say, “if they can”, and this is precisely the problem: unlike humans, most animals—in particular those which we usually kill and eat—do not have the capacity to *exercise* those rights, so that the sense in which they have them (if any) can only be a weak one.

It seems, then, that neither the difference in intelligence nor the lack of reciprocity can serve as good criteria for not attributing a similar moral value to human suffering and animal suffering. More generally, I guess that it would be very difficult for you to come up with a good criterion.

Mechoui: You may be right about this. But let me now go back to your initial characterisation of good and bad behaviour, which seems a bit too simple to me. You were talking about improving or worsening the state of “an individual”, but a lot of situations do not involve just one individual; and applying your initial characterisation to those situations would lead you to important problems. First, it would lead you to counterintuitive conclusions. Consider a case in which your behaviour worsens someone’s state and improves the states of many. In that case, even if such behaviour worsens the state of someone, you will probably not consider it as a bad behaviour, as it improves the states of more individuals. Second, it would even lead you to incoherent conclusions: if a certain behaviour affects only two people, one positively and the other one negatively, then, according to your characterisation, such behaviour will be both good and bad. So I suggest that your initial characterisation should take into account the number of individuals positively affected and the number of individuals negatively affected.

And I think that even the resulting characterisation would be inadequate. Imagine the following case: you have to decide whether to adopt a behaviour which would improve the state of someone and worsen the state of someone else by a significantly larger amount. If you only consider that the number of individuals whose state would be improved is equal to the number of individuals whose state would be worsened, then you will conclude that whether adopting this behaviour or not is morally neutral. But this does not seem right. So I suggest that your initial characterisation should also take into account the *extent* to which each individual is affected. (The resulting view would be utilitarian in spirit; see e.g. Bentham 1789, and Mill 1861.)

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Kardamon: I agree that my initial characterisation requires these two modifications. And I even think that a further one is needed. Imagine the following scenario. You have to decide whether to adopt a behaviour that would improve the state of someone by a certain amount and worsen the state of someone else by the same amount. In such a case, if you just consider the number and the extent of the negative and positive shifts in well-being, you would have to conclude that adopting this behaviour would be morally equivalent to not adopting it. But this does not seem right in general. Suppose that one of them (the one whose state would be negatively affected) finds herself in a situation of extreme suffering and the other one in a state of extreme well-being. Now it seems that it would be wrong to adopt such a behaviour, since the moral value that we attribute to a shift does not only depend on its extent but also on where it takes place on the continuum from extreme suffering to extreme well-being: for a given shift, the closer it takes place to extreme suffering, the greater the moral value that we attribute to it. (A similar idea is at the core of prioritarianism; see e.g. Arneson 1999, Parfit 1997.)

Mechoui: This seems reasonable to me. On that basis, we could characterise a good behaviour as follows. In a given situation, a good behaviour is one whose effects have the maximal moral value (compared to the effects of alternative behaviours). The moral value of these effects is assessed on the basis of the criteria that we have established earlier: (a) the number of individuals positively affected and the number of individuals negatively affected; (b) the extent to which each individual is affected; (c) the initial state of each affected individual (on the continuum from suffering to well-being).

Now, let us try to apply these criteria to our initial question: “May we eat animals?”.

Kardamon: Let us consider a simple case, that could easily be generalised to answer our question. Take someone who eats the meat of an animal (maybe a chicken) in three meals. Applying criteria (a), (b) and (c), he would have to sum, on the one hand, the positive moral value attached to his eating meat three times (instead of eating something else) and, on the other hand, the negative moral value attached to the chicken’s being bred, transported and killed in painful conditions (e.g. Mason & Singer 1990, Grandin 1997). It seems quite clear to me that the total moral value attached to eating this chicken will be negative.

Mechoui: I may agree. But I have a few objections. First of all, your example implies that if one person chooses not to eat meat, the animals that he would have eaten will not suffer. However, if I stopped eating meat, the total produc-

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tion of meat would remain (almost) unchanged, and so would the total amount of animal suffering. And even if the current number of vegetarians doubled, the total production of meat would probably not change significantly—according to basic principles of economics, this small decrease in the demand for meat would slightly decrease the price of meat, which would lead to a very small decrease in the supply of meat. Thus, it seems to me that eating or not eating meat has the same negative moral value (the suffering of animals remains the same). But if I do not eat meat, I lose the well-being that I get from it. So it seems that the total moral value attached to eating meat is higher.

Kardamon: You may be right that eating and not eating animals are almost equivalent behaviours for an individual as regards the total amount of animal suffering. But you are wrong in thinking that both behaviours have the same negative moral value. Indeed, if you do not eat meat, there is no negative moral value attached to your behaviour. But if you do eat meat, there will be a negative moral value attached to your behaviour. In order to see that, let us first consider the behaviour of the community of meat eaters: it clearly has a negative moral value.

Mechoui: I agree, since, for the whole community, eating or not eating meat are clearly not equivalent behaviours as regards animal suffering.

Kardamon: Let us call this negative moral value 'n'. n is due to the total amount of animals eaten by the community. As each member of the community eats a part of this amount, it seems clear that each individual's choice to eat meat has a negative moral value, which is a corresponding portion of n (see e.g. Kagan 2011). Thus, eating or not eating meat do not have the same negative moral value, even if the total amount of animal suffering is the same in both cases; and this is because, when you eat animals, you participate in the total amount of animal suffering, whereas, when you do not eat animals, you do not participate in it, so that there is no negative moral value attached to your behaviour. To put it in another way, if there indeed were no negative moral value attached to an individual's eating meat, then how could n be different from zero?

In the end, the total moral value attached to someone's choice to eat meat will clearly be negative, as in the characteristic example that I suggested earlier (someone eating a chicken instead of something else). So it should be concluded that the right choice for an individual, just as for the community, is not to eat meat.

Besides, the choice not to eat meat can also lead to an *indirect* effect, which makes the moral value attached to this choice even higher with respect to the

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moral value attached to the opposite choice: if you do not eat meat, you may influence other people to adopt the same behaviour, and hence indirectly produce further positive moral effects.

Mechoui: I may accept that, at least for individuals who can live without eating meat—not, for example, for people who would starve or eat unhealthy food if they chose not to eat meat.

Kardamon: Of course, for the choice not to eat meat to be the right one, the negative moral value attached to it has to be lower (in absolute terms) than the positive moral value; this follows from the criteria that we have established earlier.

Mechoui: I see. But I have a last objection, which concerns long-term evolution. We agreed from the beginning that the negative moral value attached to eating meat is about animal suffering. Now imagine that the methods for breeding and killing the animals that we eat become less and less harmful for them; or, to make the point clearer, imagine that we arrive at a situation where we can kill these animals without making them suffer at all. Would there remain a negative moral value to the choice of eating meat?

Kardamon: Interesting point, indeed. Let us first consider the case in which these animals suffer, but significantly less than they do now. This seems not likely in the short run, but it may be possible in the long run. If it indeed happened, then the negative moral value attached to eating meat would decrease by some amount. However, given what we said before about the positive and the negative moral values attached to eating meat and not eating meat, it might well be that such a decrease would not be sufficient to make the choice of eating meat morally preferable to the opposite choice.

Let us now consider a situation in which the animals that humans eat would not suffer any more (than they would suffer if they were not bred and killed to be eaten). First of all, as you will probably agree, this situation seems very unlikely, even in the long run. But let us imagine ourselves in such a situation. Even if killing an animal to eat it does not make the animal itself suffer at all, it can still have a negative moral value, since it can make *other* individuals suffer—for instance, killing the mother of three newborn calves will probably make the calves suffer.

Mechoui: I agree. However, there are cases in which killing an animal does not make *anyone* suffer—think, for instance, of a lonely animal. For all such cases, there seems to be an incompatibility between our intuitions, according to which

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killing the animal still has a negative moral value (see e.g. Regan 1985), and our characterisation of good and bad behaviour in terms of well-being and suffering.

Kardamon: Even in these cases, I do not think that our characterisation has to be incompatible with our moral intuitions. Let us consider two such cases: in the first one, the animal, very happy and healthy, clearly experiences more well-being than suffering in its life, and will most probably continue to do so; in the second case, the animal, extremely unhappy and unhealthy, experiences far more suffering than well-being in its life, and will most probably continue to do so. In the first case, killing the animal (instead of not killing it, which is an available alternative) will prevent it from continuing to make a strictly positive contribution to the total well-being of the individuals involved in the situation; once dead, it will make a zero contribution instead. Hence, according to our characterisation, killing the animal will have a negative moral effect; and this seems to be compatible with our intuitions. In the second case, the same kind of reasoning will lead us to the conclusion that, on our characterisation, killing the animal will not have a negative moral effect; and this also seems intuitive to me, although it may be more controversial.

As it is quite late, I suggest that we continue to discuss this difficult problem some other day. At this point, I would say that our characterisation of morality in terms of well-being and suffering remains quite intuitive and plausible to me.

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