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The Predation Argument

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One common objection to ethical vegetarianism concerns the morality of the predator-prey relationship. According to some critics, ethical vegetarians fail to recognize that human beings are predatory animals (while not carnivores, at least omnivores), and that meat is a natural part of the human diet. If it is natural for human beings to eat meat, how could it be wrong? Related to this is the charge that ethical vegetarians are in the awkward position of condemning, not just human predation, but all forms of natural predation. If we should interfere in the operations of the meat industry or abolish recreational hunting because of the misery which these practices inflict upon animals, shouldn't we also interfere in the operations of nature and protect prey animals from wild predators? The objection raised here is sometimes called the "predation argument." In what follows, I will examine three versions of the argument.

One version of the predation argument rests upon a comparison between human predation and predation in the wild. For many people, there is no significant difference between what human beings do in eating meat and what natural predators do in killing prey for food. Clearly, a wolf does nothing wrong in killing sheep for food, so why should it be wrong for human beings to eat meat? As Kent Baldner writes, "If killing for food is morally justifiable for natural predators, the same should be true for human predators,

whether they are individual hunters or corporate factory farmers” (2). Set forth as an argument, we have:

- (1) It is morally acceptable for wild animals to kill prey.
- (2) There is no significant difference between human predation and predation in the wild.

Therefore:

- (3) It is morally acceptable for human beings to kill animals for food.

Although this is a common objection to ethical vegetarianism, it is not terribly difficult to refute. Is it plausible to maintain that whatever behavior is acceptable for wild animals is also acceptable for human beings? This seems doubtful. “It is odd,” Peter Singer once remarked, “how humans, who normally consider themselves so far above other animals, will, if it seems to support their dietary preferences, use an argument that implies that we ought to look to other animals for moral inspiration and guidance” (224).¹ The problem concerns the second premise. Many philosophers would argue that there are important moral differences between humans and other animals. One difference is that humans are moral agents—that is, beings capable of understanding moral principles and guiding their conduct accordingly—whereas other animals (presumably) are not. Animals lack the conceptual resources to form moral judgments about their behavior. For this reason, it may be permissible for wolves to kill sheep for food, but not for human being to do so.

Wolves are not moral agents, whereas human beings are. Because wolves are not moral agents, their behavior cannot be evaluated morally; but because human beings are moral agents, their actions can be evaluated morally. Therefore, behavior which is morally neutral for wolves, such as killing sheep, may be morally wrong for human beings.

A different response to the predation argument is suggested by Stephen Sapontzis. Rather than arguing that there are important moral differences between humans and other animals, Sapontzis suggests that the predatory practices of wild animals might be judged morally wrong even if these animals are not moral agents. Consider the example of a small child—someone who is also not a moral agent—tormenting a cat. Sapontzis writes:

The child may be too young to recognize and respond to humane moral obligations. However, while this may influence our evaluation of his/her character and responsibility for his/her actions, it does not lead us to conclude that there is nothing wrong with his/her tormenting the cat. To take another example, if we determine that someone is criminally insane, i.e., is incapable of distinguishing right from wrong, this affects our evaluation of his/her responsibility for his/her actions and whether he/she deserves punishment for them. However, it does not lead us to conclude that there was nothing wrong with those actions (28).

Sapontzis's point is that whether or not someone is a moral agent is relevant to certain kinds of moral judgments, such as assignments of moral responsibility, but not to the moral

¹ All references to Singer's work are to *Animal Liberation*, unless otherwise indicated. *Between the Species* V August 2005 www.cla.calpoly.edu/bts/

evaluation of that person's actions. If a child torments a cat, what the child does is wrong whether or not the child realizes it or should be held accountable for her actions. And if a cat torments a bird, this is wrong too whether or not the cat realizes it or should be held accountable for her actions. The child and the cat simply don't know any better, but this doesn't render their actions morally neutral. Similarly, a wolf who preys upon sheep may not know any better, but this doesn't make the wolf's actions morally neutral. If Sapontzis is right, then, interestingly, it is not the second premise of the above argument which is suspect, but rather the first.

Let us now turn to a slightly different version of the argument. Sometimes the predation argument is based upon a consideration of what is natural, and the morality of living according to one's nature. If human beings are by nature omnivores, how can it be wrong for them to eat meat? Fully spelled out, we have the following argument:

- (1) It is not wrong for natural predators to kill other animals for food.
- (2) Human beings are natural predators (that is, meat eaters by nature).

Therefore:

- (3) It is not wrong for human beings to kill other animals for food.

This version of the argument, unlike the first one, does not rest upon a comparison between human predation and predation in the wild. Rather it rests upon the general moral principle, expressed in the first premise, that if an animal is by nature a meat eater—

as, it is assumed, human beings are—then there is nothing wrong with that animal killing other animals for food. This might be true even if there are important moral differences between human behavior and animal behavior. So this version of the argument is not necessarily open to the same criticisms as the first one.

There are, however, grave problems with the general moral principle underlying this argument. It is not uncommon to argue that if something is natural, it is morally acceptable, and this seems to be what supports the first premise of the argument. Yet there is no obvious conceptual connection between natural behavior and morally correct behavior. Viewed from a Darwinian perspective, what has shaped animal behavior throughout the long history of life on this planet is the contest for survival. “Natural” behavior, in this sense, is simply whatever behavior is most successful in this competitive struggle, and this has nothing to do with promoting moral ideals. Those forms of behavior which are most conducive to transmitting an animal’s genetic material to future generations are selected for, and those forms of behavior which are least conducive to this end are selected against. For this reason there are many forms of behavior which are perfectly natural, yet quite deplorable when viewed from a moral standpoint. It is, for example, “natural” for the strong to dominate the weak and for animals to engage in violent mating rituals. Among human beings, perhaps even racism, sexism, war, and genocide are natural. Yet no one would argue that these practices are morally unobjectionable. Living a moral life involves striving to bring about a better world, not simply conforming to the ways of nature. Therefore, predation might be natural for many animals, including human beings, and yet be morally unacceptable. If the world would be improved by a

reduction in suffering, and if predation contributes to the amount of suffering in the world, then, other things being equal, it would be better if predation did not occur.

There are other problems with the argument. Although some philosophers, such as John Hill, argue that human beings possess both herbivorous and carnivorous characteristics, there are many reasons, rooted in our physiology and evolutionary past, for believing that humans are not true omnivores. If we are not, then the second premise is false and the argument collapses. Another objection has to do, not with the argument itself, but with its application to meat eating in America and other industrialized nations. No one could reasonably claim that the factory-farming methods employed in these countries are in any sense “natural.” Therefore, it may in principle be permissible for human beings to use animals for food, but in actual practice, because of the methods employed in animal agriculture, it may still be wrong. The argument seems to provide at best a defense of the subsistence hunting practices of hunter-gatherers, not of factory farming in industrialized nations. Finally, it might be argued that predation is justifiable for human beings when morally preferable alternatives are unavailable, but not when they are available. So, for instance, it might be acceptable for traditional Inuit to kill animals for food, since no alternatives exist, but it would not be permissible for Americans to do the same, since vegetarian alternatives are readily available.

Let us now turn to a very different version of the argument, what is sometimes called the “predation *reductio*.” A *reductio* (more precisely, a *reductio ad absurdum*) is an argument which attempts to refute some position by “reducing it to absurdity”—that is, by deducing from it some absurd or ridiculous consequence. The predation *reductio* is an argument which attempts to refute ethical vegetarianism by deducing from it an absurd

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consequence involving the abolition of natural predation. “Among the most disturbing implications drawn from conventional indiscriminate animal liberation/rights theory,” writes J. Baird Callicott, “is that, were it possible for us to do so, we ought to protect innocent vegetarian animals from their carnivorous predators” (258). This charge, in one form or another, is often leveled against ethical vegetarianism. Fully developed, the predation *reductio* proceeds as follows:

- (1) Let us assume, along with the ethical vegetarian, that other animals are members of the moral community and, consequently, that there is a moral obligation to alleviate animal suffering and otherwise protect animals from harm.²
- (2) Wild predators harm prey animals.

Therefore:

- (3) If the ethical vegetarian is right, there is a moral obligation to prevent predation in the wild.
- (4) But it is absurd to suppose that there is such an obligation.

Therefore:

² This should be interpreted as a *prima facie* obligation. In other words, the fact that an animal is threatened with harm constitutes a good moral reason—which may or may not be outweighed by other morally relevant considerations—for coming to that animal’s assistance. (On the interpretation of moral principles adopted here, a moral principle does not express an exceptionless moral duty, but rather a moral reason for action. If we have a

- (5) The ethical vegetarian is wrong—that is, other animals are not members of the moral community.

The moral principle lying behind this argument is the Good Samaritan Principle: if others are in need of assistance, and we are in a position to help, then we should.³ By “others” in this context is meant other members of the moral community. According to the ethical vegetarian, this category includes a large class of nonhuman animals. Hence, just as we should come to the assistance of a human being in need, we should come to the assistance of another animal equally in need. Consider, for instance, what our reaction would be if another human being were attacked by a wild animal. To stand by and do nothing would obviously be wrong. We have a moral obligation to protect all members of the moral community from harm, whenever possible, whether this results from crime, accidents, disease, natural disasters, or wild animals. Hence, we have an obligation to protect human beings from predators. The problem, for the ethical vegetarian, is that if animals are members of the moral community, by parallel steps in reasoning, we reach the conclusion that prey animals should be protected from predators. Yet how could anyone reasonably maintain that there is an obligation to abolish natural predation? Since this conclusion is unacceptable, the assumption on which it rests is also unacceptable. Animals, in other words, are not members of the moral community.

good moral reason for doing something, then we should act on that reason, if possible, unless we have better moral reasons for not doing so. The right thing to do, in any situation, is to act according to the *best* moral reasons.)

³ Again, this should be interpreted as a *prima facie* obligation. If coming to the assistance of one person involved directly harming another, this would count as a good moral reason for not intervening. This is certainly relevant to

Despite its apparent naiveté, the predation *reductio* cannot be easily dismissed, as many philosophers have tried to do. “The short and simple answer,” writes Peter Singer, after raising the question of prey protection, “is that once we give up our claim to ‘dominion’ over the other species we should stop interfering with them at all. We should leave them alone as much as we possibly can. Having given up the role of tyrant, we should not try to play God either” (226). Yet this quick response is hardly consistent with Singer’s own claim that animal suffering is to be counted equally with human suffering. If animals, no less than human beings, are members of the moral community, we are not “interfering” with them by protecting them from harm; rather we are responding to their needs and showing as much concern for their interests as for the interests of other human beings.

Singer admits that this short and simple answer is inadequate. It is conceivable, he concedes, “that human interference will improve the conditions of animals, and so be justifiable.” But, he goes on:

Judging by our past record, any attempt to change ecological systems on a large scale is going to do far more harm than good. For that reason, if for no other, it is true to say that, except in a few very limited cases, we cannot and should not try to police all of nature. We do enough if we eliminate our own unnecessary killing and cruelty toward other animals (226).

the question of prey protection. To extend protection to prey animals might well involve condemning predatory animals to death by starvation.

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Surely, Singer would not say that we “do enough” for other human beings if we eliminate our own unnecessary killing and cruelty toward them.⁴ So why is it that we do enough for other animals by refraining from these practices? Why, in other words, should we intervene on behalf of other human beings, but simply leave other animals alone? To be frank, Singer *can't* say this. For Singer, vegetarianism is a form of boycott undertaken for the purpose of ending the suffering of animals on factory farms. By purchasing meat products, consumers do not themselves directly harm animals; rather this is done by the meat industry. The obligation which consumers have to become vegetarians, therefore, is not based upon the obligation to refrain from harming animals, but upon the obligation to *protect* animals from harm.⁵ If we should protect animals from the harms inflicted by the meat industry, why should we not protect them from the harms inflicted by natural predators? It may be true that by intervening on a large scale in the operations of nature we would do more harm than good; but from this it does not follow that we should do nothing, or intervene in only a “few very limited cases.” This is black-and-white thinking. In any event, Singer's response misses the point. The important question is whether ethical vegetarianism entails a moral obligation to protect prey animals. Even if this obligation is overridden by other considerations in most cases, the point of the predation *reductio* is that it is absurd to suppose that there is any such obligation to begin with. If it is a consequence of Singer's moral views that there *is* such an obligation, even one that is

⁴ In Chapter 8 of *Practical Ethics*, for instance, Singer argues that rich nations should intervene to help end hunger in poor nations. Those who die from hunger are not the targets of unnecessary killing and cruelty, but the victims of culpable neglect.

⁵ This claim is debatable. While it is true that consumers do not *directly* harm farm animals by purchasing meat products, it might be wondered whether they *indirectly* harm them. I leave it to the reader to decide. My point is that, for Singer, becoming a vegetarian is a way of *preventing* the cruelties inflicted upon animals by the meat industry, and is, in this sense, a way of *protecting* animals from harm.

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usually overridden, then he must somehow dispel the apparent absurdity of this consequence.

Tom Regan approaches the problem in a different way, arguing that there is no obligation to prevent predation in the wild because wild predators are not moral agents and, therefore, cannot violate the rights of prey. In *The Case for Animal Rights*, he writes:

Only moral agents can have duties, and this because only these individuals have the cognitive and other abilities necessary for being held morally accountable for what they do or fail to do. Wolves are not moral agents. They cannot bring impartial reasons to bear on their decision making—cannot, that is, apply the formal principle of justice or any of its normative interpretations. That being so, wolves in particular and moral patients generally cannot *themselves* meaningfully be said to have duties to anyone, nor, therefore, the particular duty to respect the rights possessed by other animals. In claiming that we have a prima facie duty to assist those animals *whose rights are violated*, therefore, we are not claiming that we have a duty to assist the sheep against the attack of the wolf, since the wolf neither can nor does violate anyone's rights (285).

It may or may not be true that wolves violate the rights of sheep, but surely this is not the only consideration relevant to deciding whether there is an obligation to protect sheep from wolves. Again, consider what our reaction would be if a human being were attacked by a wild animal. No one could reasonably argue that because a wild animal is not a moral

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agent and cannot, therefore, violate anyone's rights, this releases us from any obligation to come to that person's assistance. We have a moral obligation to protect all members of the moral community from harm, whenever possible, whether or not this harm comes from moral agents. If sheep are members of the moral community, therefore, it would certainly seem to follow that there is an obligation to protect them from wolves, whether or not wolves violate their rights.

How might the vegetarian successfully counter the predation *reductio*? One possibility is suggested by our discussion of Singer. Perhaps the obligation to become a vegetarian is not based upon the obligation to protect animals from harm, but upon the obligation to protect them from *unnecessary* harm. This points to an important distinction between animal agriculture and natural predation. Whereas wild predators must kill other animals for food or else die from starvation, for the vast majority of people, meat is simply a luxury. If this is a morally significant difference, then it may not be obligatory to prevent natural predation even if it is obligatory to boycott the products of animal agriculture. One serious shortcoming of this reply, however, is that it does not explain why we should still protect other human beings from predators, as presumably we should. Human beings are not by nature at the top of the food chain. Throughout most of human history (and even today in some parts of the world), human beings were the natural prey of large cats and other predators. If animals, no less than human beings, are members of the moral community and deserving of our compassion, then we cannot consistently claim that we should protect humans but not animals from the ravages of predation.⁶

⁶ One way in which we might try to resolve this inconsistency is by arguing that human life (ordinarily) has greater value than animal life. While we may not be able to choose between the life of a sheep and the life of a wolf (who *Between the Species* V August 2005 www.cla.calpoly.edu/bts/)

The only remaining possibility, it seems, is to reject the fourth premise of the *reductio*—that is, to concede that ethical vegetarianism entails an obligation to prevent natural predation, but to deny the absurdity of this consequence. This, for example, is the position defended by Stephen Sapontzis and criticized by Kent Baldner. Sapontzis argues that we are morally obligated to prevent predation in the wild, at least when doing so would not produce more suffering than it would prevent. Baldner, arguing from the standpoint of a holistic ethic, claims that an obligation to prevent natural predation is morally absurd. To suppose that predation is unacceptable, as Sapontzis does, implies that there is something morally repugnant about nature. For Baldner, such a position is profoundly arrogant.

Without commenting further on the exchange between Sapontzis and Baldner, let us briefly examine the charge that the obligation to prevent natural predation is morally absurd. What exactly does this mean? There seem to be two possibilities. First, it might mean that the obligation to protect prey animals from natural predators is inherently absurd, like the obligation to protect rocks from natural erosion, or to protect water from evaporation. It simply makes no moral sense at all. Second, it might mean that such an obligation, while morally meaningful, is nonetheless incompatible with our deepest moral convictions. It should not surprise us that ethical holists, such as Baldner and Callicott, whose moral outlook is shaped by the land ethic of Aldo Leopold, would insist that the

must eat sheep or other prey in order to survive), certainly we can choose between the life of a (normal) human being and the life of a wolf (or some other natural predator). This might explain why we would not be inconsistent in protecting human beings from natural predators, but not other animals. This is a plausible position, but consider the following imaginary case. Suppose the earth was invaded by carnivorous aliens who could satisfy their nutritional needs only by consuming human flesh. Suppose further that these aliens far surpassed human beings in intelligence, rationality, and so on, so that alien life was judged to have greater value than human life. Would we, for this reason, have no obligation to protect human beings from these alien predators?

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obligation to protect prey animals from natural predators is morally absurd. According to Leopold, “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise” (224-5). For Leopold, the suffering endured by prey animals is not in itself a good moral reason for interfering in the operations of nature. It is the good of the whole community of life that has moral importance, not the good of any individual living being. If the predator-prey relationship, in all its multifarious forms, contributes to the “integrity, stability, and beauty” of nature, as arguably it does, then, for Leopold, it should be preserved.

Is the obligation to protect prey animals morally absurd in either one of these senses? There are examples which suggest otherwise. Consider an insect, known as *cephenomyia trompe*, whose larvae feed and grow in the nostrils of reindeer, slowing suffocating the animals to death.⁷ If such parasitism could be eliminated, without significant cost to ourselves, and without disturbing the balance of nature, should we do so? While we might hesitate to interfere in the lifecycle of *cephenomyia trompe*, how can we not have compassion for an animal dying a slow death from suffocation? Would it be inherently absurd, or incompatible with our deepest moral convictions, to suggest that reindeer should be spared this ordeal? Clearly not. The difference between protecting rocks from erosion and protecting animals from predation is that rocks do not *suffer* from erosion, whereas animals certainly do suffer from predation. If animal suffering counts for something in the moral balance, then the fact that animals suffer from predation constitutes a good moral reason for preventing it, and one which we should act on, unless

⁷ This example is discussed by Arne Naess in “Should We Try To Relieve Clear Cases of Extreme Suffering in Nature?”

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other considerations weigh against this. As Singer notes, there are reasons for supposing that any attempt to alter ecological systems on a large scale would do more harm than good.⁸ Still it is not *inherently* absurd to suppose that there is an obligation to protect animals from natural predators, even if this obligation has limited practical application. Nor (except, perhaps, in the case of ethical holists) does it conflict with our deepest moral convictions. If one of these convictions is that we should strive to reduce the amount of suffering in the world, then assisting prey animals, in some cases at least, is one way in which this might be accomplished.

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⁸ Although Singer is not specific about these reasons, two are rather obvious. First, as already noted, extending protection to prey animals would in all likelihood involve condemning an indefinite number of predators to death by starvation. Second, successfully segregating predators from prey would require greatly restricting the freedom of these animals, and so diminish the quality of their lives. An additional consideration is that the energy and resources invested in any large-scale effort to protect prey animals would almost certainly be better utilized in the preservation and restoration of wildlife habitats. As a general policy, we do more good for animals by protecting them from human encroachment than by protecting them from natural predators.

