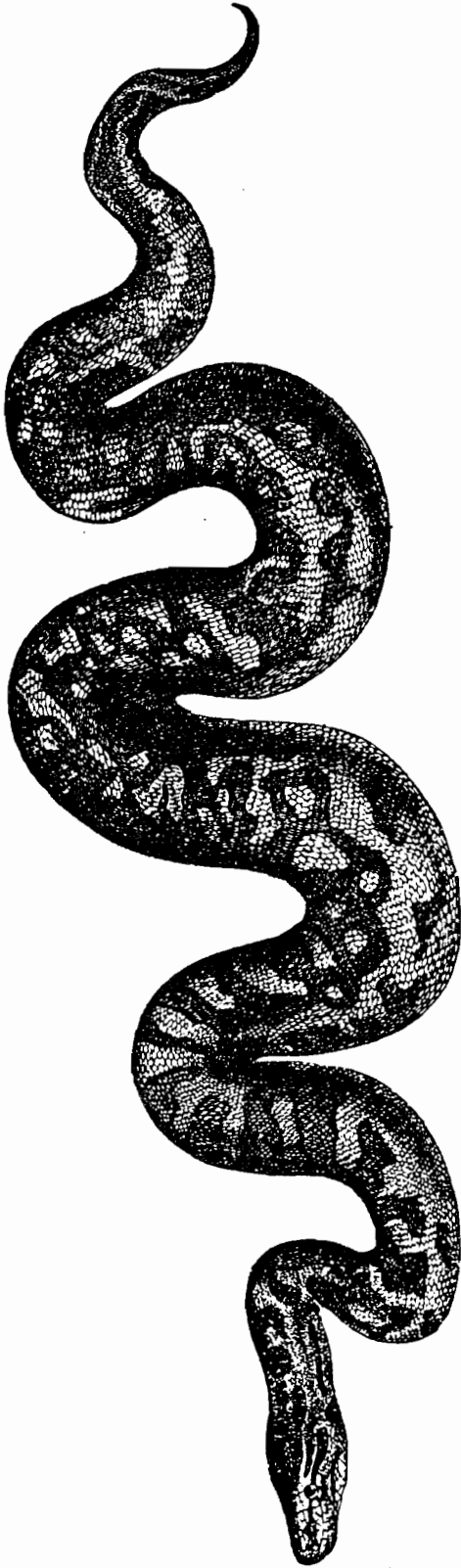


Mary Midgley



Jim Harter, *Animals: 1400*
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New York: Dover, 1979



Dear Editors,

Thank you for your kind invitation to comment on Donald Vandaveer's very friendly review of my book, Animals and Why They Matter. I had better go straight to the two things that worry him in the book: (1) my refusal to take sides in the current philosophical feud between utilitarians and Rights Theorists and (2) my refraining from giving explicit practical directions on how far reform ought to go.

My reply to (1) is straightforward. I think these disputes totally misconceived--not just in this area but in general. The idea that morality could be reduced to a single basic form is a foolish one. Morality has many aspects, which are not in competition. Historically, the present game of football seems to have arisen because the original Utilitarians--who were essentially practical reformers--were occupied with certain specific issues where attention to consequences was of the greatest moral importance--chiefly with punishment but also with various forms of repression, notably sexual ones. This led them to erect the question of consequences into a universal moral criterion, thereby provoking their opponents to an equally unrealistic opposite form of exclusiveness. I think that the right way to deal with all such exclusive claims--which, of



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course, are found much farther back than Bentham--is to concentrate on the positive point being made in the area which the particular moralist really wants to handle and write off the negative propaganda as the mistake which it usually is--though it can, of course, be useful in so far as it points out the limitations of other methods.

It follows that the contemporary search for "a moral theory," meaning a single legitimate form for all justifications, is misguided. I find it particularly disturbing that this red herring has become so prominent in current discussions about animals, because there is difficulty enough in getting proper attention for the matter without wasting it on these academic artifacts. Both "rights" language and consequence language have their place in this as in other moral fields. Since, however, both have been distorted and corrupted by scholars, and since many questions are best dealt with by other ways of talking, I often avoid both and refer to current academic debates as seldom as possible.

This brings us to (2), where the point is essentially the same. Doubt about what practical suggestions I am making has been expressed by other academics before VanDeVeer, but it doesn't extend to the general public. This is clear from many letters sent to me, notably from one lately sent by a man who said that I had literally forced him to change his life. (He is now an organic farmer in the Hebrides and an ardent campaigner on behalf of farm animals.) It is true that I did not spell out practical conclusions in the book, and for the following reasons. When I came to the last chapter, I saw that I had the choice of lifting up my voice and howling or simply letting my readers draw their own conclusions from what I had written so far. Howling does have a point, and I do sometimes do it. But it has the drawback of making people react--more especially academics--by providing them with something to contradict. Since contradiction is their most dearly ingrained professional habit, and substitute for action, this is counter-productive. What I had done was to demolish systematically the traditional intellectual justifications for current treatment of animals. Each individual has then to consider how he or she is going to make do without those justifications. Nobody can force them to drink the water to which they have been led, and I did not try to. In any case, for

PROMETHEUS

(Prometheus loved only man.)

The same fire that cooks the goose
cooks the lentil. . . .

But Prometheus is not attacked each day
by a squadron of angry vegetables. No.

Paulette Callen

all moral questions, the query "how far ought we to go towards getting rid of this iniquity?" is not a useful or even very clear one at the point where we are only starting. (For instance, ought all prisons to be abolished? Ought nobody ever to lose his/her temper? Ought inequality of income to be made actually impossible?) Again, the habit of rushing straight to such questions, which can't actually be dealt with, seems to me an academic vice which teachers should be retraining in their pupils, not actively encouraging as they are at present--it is a displacement activity.

You will see that my whole view of philosophy is a somewhat peculiar one by present-day standards. If this mystifies anyone, my other books exist to explain it, and I have dealt directly with the matter in an article called "Philosophizing Out In the World" in Social Research 52/3 (1985). The last section of my Beast and Man is also to the point.

Yours, etc.,

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