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Notes & Comments

Mohandas K. Gandhi and Tom Regan: Advocates for Animal Rights

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IN THE EARLY 1970s,^a a young philosopher by the name of Tom Regan, horrified by the tragic loss of innocent human lives in the then ongoing Vietnam War, went to the university library and buried himself in books on war, violence, and human rights, determined to prove that the American involvement in the war was morally wrong. One day, he picked up Mohandas K. Gandhi's autobiography, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*.¹ Reading it with great care and interest, he surely came across the following passage:

To my mind the life of a lamb is no less precious than that of a human being. I should be unwilling to take the life of a lamb for the sake of the human body. I hold that, the more helpless a creature, the more entitled it is to protection by man from the cruelty of man.²

Little did he know that this literary encounter with Gandhi would change his life forever and have a lasting and profound impact on the history of moral philosophy. He asked himself: "How can I oppose the unjustified killing of human beings in Vietnam and at the same time fill my freezer with the dead body parts of innocent animals?"³ Shortly thereafter, in 1975, he published his first article on the moral

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status of non-human animals. As its title, he chose *The Moral Basis of Vegetarianism*,⁴ the same title as that of a 1959 collection of writings by Gandhi.⁵ He argued that vegetarianism and, more generally, the idea of animal rights are not the products of excessive sentimentality they are often perceived to be, but rather “have a rational foundation.”⁶ In the decades that followed, he further developed and defended that argument in more than twenty books, hundreds of articles, and countless public lectures across the globe, and he became one of the philosophical leaders of the animal rights movement. In a telling reminder that the power of ideas knows no national or cultural boundaries, he wrote later in his life: “I think it is fair to say that I would never have become an animal rights advocate if I had not read [...] [Gandhi’s] autobiography.”⁷ Earlier this year, on February 17, Regan passed away. He died of pneumonia at his home in Raleigh, North Carolina, at the age of 78.⁸

Regan’s most notable book, *The Case for Animal Rights*, was first published in 1983, and has since been translated into several languages.⁹ It contains the most comprehensive account of his theory of animal rights and played a crucial role in establishing the intellectual respectability of the animal rights movement. With more than 400 pages of dense philosophical reasoning, it is not an easy book to read, but the basic argument is easy enough to understand.

If all human beings have equal moral rights,¹⁰ as virtually everybody agrees they do, these rights must be based on a relevant similarity between them.¹¹ That similarity cannot be, as is often uncritically assumed, the fact that all human beings are members of the species *Homo sapiens*, as it would be no less arbitrary to base rights on species membership than on being of a certain race or gender. We consider it wrong and call it sexism to deny the protections afforded by rights to women just because they are women, and we call it racism when race is used to justify treating members of racial minority groups with less respect or less consideration for their interests. Analogously, wrongful discrimination based on species membership has come to be known as *speciesism*,¹² a term originally coined by British psychologist Richard D. Ryder and popularized by Australian philosopher Peter Singer.¹³ Our biological humanity carries no intrinsic moral significance and is hence ill-suited to serve as a basis on which rights can plausibly be ascribed.

Rationality, the ability to use language, and moral agency, features we like to think make us special among the animals, are not plausible candidates either. After all, there are some of us, such as young children and people with certain severe cognitive impairments, who are incapable of rational thought, language-use, and moral agency, and yet that does

not undermine the validity of their claim to respectful treatment.

The relevant similarity between human beings, Regan argues, is that we are all experiencing subjects of a life. We are not merely alive – each one of us *has a life* that makes him or her unique. The same, however, is also true of many non-human animals, which Regan explained with his characteristic eloquence at the Royal Institution of Great Britain in 1989, with an estimated audience of one million people watching the BBC live broadcast:

The other animals humans eat, use in science, hunt, trap, and exploit in a variety of other ways have a life of their own that is of importance to them, apart from their utility to us. They are not only in the world, they are aware of it and also of what happens to them. And what happens to them matters to them. Each has a life that fares experientially better or worse for the one whose life it is. Like us, they bring a unified psychological presence to the world. Like us, they are somebodies, not somethings. In these fundamental ways, the non-human animals in labs and on farms, for example, are the same as human beings.¹⁴

We must hence accept, on pain of inconsistency, that these animals, too, have moral rights, including the right not to be killed or made to suffer. The practical implications of this view are nothing short of radical and include, most importantly, the total abolition of the use of animals as experimental subjects and as sources of food, clothing, and entertainment; and this then was the basis of Regan's vegetarianism.¹⁵

For Gandhi, vegetarianism initially was not so much a matter of morality as of mere custom. He grew up in a family firmly rooted in the Vaishnava tradition of vegetarianism. Eating meat was frowned upon, and he never gave it much thought – until he made a new friend in high school. The friend's name was Mehtab and he was a classmate of his elder brother. Mehtab told Gandhi that many of their teachers were secretly eating meat, and offered the following explanation, which reflects the dominant British colonial discourse around diet at the time:

We are weak people because we do not eat meat. The English are able to rule over us, because they are meat-eaters. [...] Meat-eaters do not have boils or tumors, and even if they sometimes happen to have any, these heal quickly. Our teachers and other distinguished people who eat meat are no fools. They know its virtues. You should do likewise. There is nothing like trying. Try, and see what strength it gives.¹⁶

The friend's persistent demand eventually had the desired effect on the young Gandhi. Long having admired his friend's physical

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strength, Gandhi started experimenting with eating meat. This episode in his life, however, was not to last for long. The guilt of deceiving his parents soon became unbearable, and he went back to a vegetarian diet, even though he remained convinced of the importance of eating meat to the advancement of Indians.

That conviction changed during Gandhi's time as a law student in England, where he was introduced to the vegetarian literature of the time, particularly the work of Henry Stephens Salt. It was only then that he became "a vegetarian by choice"¹⁷ and made the promotion of vegetarianism part of his life's mission. He joined the London Vegetarian Society in 1891, and started writing for its weekly journal, *The Vegetarian*, a year later. In his articles for *The Vegetarian*, he confronts the colonial misconception that vegetarianism is inferior to diets that include meat, arguing that "vegetarianism is not only not injurious, but on the contrary is conducive to bodily strength."¹⁸ By way of example, he points to the Indian shepherd, a vegetarian and yet "a finely built man of Herculean constitution."¹⁹ The nutritional adequacy and potential health benefits of vegetarian diets have since been repeatedly confirmed by modern science. The American Dietetic Association, for example, notes that:

appropriately planned vegetarian diets, including total vegetarian or vegan diets, are healthful, nutritionally adequate, and may provide health benefits in the prevention and treatment of certain diseases. Well-planned vegetarian diets are appropriate for individuals during all stages of the life cycle, including pregnancy, lactation, infancy, childhood, and adolescence, and for athletes.²⁰

Concern for human health, however, was only one of multiple dimensions of Gandhi's vegetarianism. His opposition to meat-eating was also spiritual, political, and – maybe most importantly – ethical.²¹ In a letter to *The Natal Mercury* in 1896, Gandhi, now a barrister in South Africa, approvingly summarizes the position of the "vegetarian moralists" as affirming that,

since meat eating is not only unnecessary but harmful to the system, indulgence in it is immoral and sinful, because it involves the infliction of unnecessary pain to and cruelty towards harmless animals.²²

Meat-eating here is recognized as a wrongful kind of violence, and rejected on that basis. It should be noted that Gandhi's reference to pain and cruelty might indicate an important difference between his and Regan's moral justification of vegetarianism. For Regan, the primary wrong-making feature of eating meat is not that it involves

the infliction of pain and cruelty, but the lack of respect for the inherent value of non-human animals that we show when we kill them for food. Regan writes that:

[t]he fundamental moral wrong [of commercial animal agriculture] [...] is not that animals are kept in stressful close confinement or in isolation, or that their pain and suffering, their needs and preferences are ignored or discounted. All these *are* wrong, of course, but they are not the fundamental wrong. They are symptoms and effects of the deeper, systematic wrong that allows these animals to be viewed and treated as lacking independent value, as resources for us – as, indeed, a renewable resource. Giving farm animals more space, more natural environments, more companions does not right the fundamental wrong, any more than giving lab animals more anesthesia or bigger, cleaner cages would right the fundamental wrong in their case. Nothing less than the total dissolution of commercial animal agriculture will do this [...].²³

Gandhi's rejection of violence against non-human animals is in line with his general commitment to *ahimsa* ("non-violence") and hence, by extension, his practice of *satyagraha* ("insistence on truth" or "truth-force"), with which *ahimsa* is intimately intertwined. Some authors have even gone so far as to argue that Gandhi's conversion to ethical vegetarianism was the first step in the development of his non-violent philosophy, and served as a motivator for the steps that followed. One such author is Arun M. Sannuti, who writes that:

Gandhi's choice to become vegetarian started him on the road towards *ahimsa*, renunciation, and finally, *satyagraha* itself. Without it, he would have never realized the power of morality and never would have become the Mahatma.²⁴

Be that as it may, there is little doubt that, in Gandhi's opposition to meat-eating, moral considerations stemming from his commitment to nonviolence took precedence over all other considerations, as he drastically illustrated in a speech he gave at the London Vegetarian Society on a visit to England in 1931. With Salt by his side, Gandhi urged his audience to promote vegetarianism as a moral rather than a health issue, noting that those who become vegetarians solely out of concern for their own health are those "who largely fall back."²⁵ About his own reasons for abstaining from meat, he said:

[T]he basis of my vegetarianism is not physical, but moral. If anybody said that I should die if I did not take beef-tea or mutton, even under medical advice, I would prefer death. That is the basis of my vegetarianism.²⁶

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It is hence no surprise that Gandhi also was a staunch opponent of vivisection:

I abhor vivisection with my whole soul. I detest the unpardonable slaughter of innocent life in the name of science and humanity so-called, and all the scientific discoveries stained with innocent blood I count as of no consequence. If the circulation of blood theory could not have been discovered without vivisection, the human kind could well have done without it.²⁷

Different though their circumstances and their journeys toward animal advocacy were, Gandhi and Regan shared the vision of a world where non-human animals are not killed or made to suffer for our benefit. Sadly, while some limited progress has been made, such a world, though possible, is still a distant dream.²⁸

More than two thousand animals – not including fish and other marine animals – are killed to produce food for human consumption per second.²⁹ As global population and affluence continue to rise, so does that number. Even in India, the country with by far the largest vegetarian population, meat consumption has been steadily rising for decades, mainly due to the rapidly increasing consumption of poultry.³⁰ Gandhi hoped that “there may be born on earth some great spirit, man or woman, fired with divine pity, who will deliver us from this heinous sin [...] [and] save the lives of the innocent creatures [...].”³¹ More likely, it will take a combined effort of a great many people, especially scholars and activists, political, social, and religious leaders, and conscientious consumers, to make the dream of a world where human beings coexist peacefully with other animals a reality. Like Gandhi, Regan did his part. Combining scholarly rigor and dispassionate attention to philosophical detail with the infectious passion of moral conviction, he was as close to the ideal of a moral philosopher as only very few others, and I take comfort in knowing that his words will endure, calling on us to treat animals with the respect they are due, and continue to inspire generations to come.

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Notes

1. Gandhi 1993.
2. Gandhi 1993, p. 235.
3. Regan recounts this anecdote in Regan 2004a, cf. pp. 29-32.
4. Regan 1975.
5. Gandhi 1959.
6. Regan 1975, p. 182.
7. Regan 2004b, p. 231.
8. North Carolina State University 2017.
9. Regan 1983.
10. These rights include, for example, the rights to life and bodily integrity.
11. This is an implication of the general principle of justice that requires equals to be treated equally and unequals to be treated unequally.
12. For philosophical arguments against speciesism, see, e.g., Singer 1975, Chapter 2, Cavalieri 2001, Chapter 4, McMahan 2002, Chapter 3, Singer 2009, and Singer 2011, Chapter 3.
13. In a recent interview with *The New York Times*, Peter Singer asked, “If we think that simply being a member of the species *Homo sapiens* justifies us in giving more weight to the interests of members of our own species than we give to members of other species, what are we to say to the racists or sexists who make the same claim on behalf of their race or sex?” (Yancy & Singer 2015.) I am yet to come across a convincing answer.
14. Regan 1989.
15. Even though the word “radical” in its original meaning (going to the root) has no negative connotations, things termed radical often give rise to suspicion. Perhaps that is why Regan preferred to call the implications of his view “clear and uncompromising” (Regan 2016, p. 13), rather than radical.
16. Gandhi 1993, p. 20.
17. Gandhi 1993, p. 48.
18. Gandhi 1958, p. 33; from an article originally published in *The Vegetarian* on February 28, 1891. In a 1931 speech, however, he acknowledged that “health was by no means the monopoly of vegetarians. I found [...] that non-vegetarians were able to show, generally speaking, good health” (Gandhi 1999, p. 142).
19. Gandhi 1958, p. 32; from an article originally published in *The Vegetarian* on February 28, 1891.
20. Craig & Mangels 2009, p. 1266.
21. For a thorough and insightful discussion of the political dimension of Gandhi’s vegetarianism, see Mishra 2015. Premanand Mishra argues that Gandhi’s vegetarianism in part was an intervention into the gastro-politics of British colonialism.
22. Gandhi 1999, p. 141; from a letter originally published in *The Natal Mercury* on February 3, 1896.
23. Regan 2016, p. 13.

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24. Sannuti 2017. Along similar lines, Constantine Sandis writes that “Gandhi’s vegetarianism nicely compliments – and might even be thought to have motivated – his general advocacy of non-violence which was to mark India’s struggle for independence from British colonial rule” (Sandis 2010, p. 28).
25. Gandhi 1999, p. 142.
26. Gandhi 1999, p. 143.
27. Gandhi 1980, p. 89; from an article originally published in *Young India* on December 17, 1925.
28. For a summary of some of the progress that has been made, see Regan 2003, pp. 118-121.
29. Cf. Compassion in World Farming 2013, p. 5.
30. Cf. Meat consumption per capita 2009.
31. Gandhi 1993, p. 235.

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