

A Critique of Mary Anne Warren's Weak Animal Rights View

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In her book, *Moral Status*, Mary Anne Warren defends a comprehensive theory of the moral status of various entities. Under this theory, she argues that animals may have some moral rights but that their rights are much weaker in strength than the rights of humans, who have rights in the fullest, strongest sense. Subsequently, Warren believes that our duties to animals are far weaker than our duties to other humans. This weakness is especially evident from the fact that Warren believes that it is frequently permissible for humans to kill animals for food. Warren's argument for her view consists primarily in the belief that we have inevitable practical conflicts with animals that make it impossible to grant them equal rights without sacrificing basic human interests. However, her arguments fail to justify her conclusions. In particular, Warren fails to justify her beliefs that animals do not have an equal right to life and that it is permissible for humans to kill animals for food.

I. INTRODUCTION

In examining the moral status of nonhuman animals, one primary question that arises is whether animals possess moral rights that are equal in strength to human moral rights (i.e., rights in the fullest sense). For example, do animals have an equal or full right to life, such that we have a strong duty not to kill animals, a duty equal in strength to the duty not to take human life? Such a right would morally prohibit us from killing animals for purposes such as food, material, and scientific experimentation.

Numerous arguments have been advanced against the view that animals have full or equal moral rights. In this paper, I examine one of those arguments in particular, an argument put forth by Mary Anne Warren in her book, *Moral Status*. Warren defends a comprehensive theory of the moral standing of various entities, including humans, animals, plants, and ecosystems. My concern here lies with the moral standing of animals in particular. Warren's view of the moral standing of animals is that animals may have some rights, but their rights, for the most part, are much weaker in strength than the rights of humans, who possess rights in the strongest, fullest sense. Subsequently, Warren holds that we have some duties to animals, but that these duties are far weaker than the duties we have to other humans. Her view is especially evident

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in the fact that she thinks it is frequently permissible for humans to kill animals for food. Warren's argument for her view consists primarily in the thought that we have inevitable practical conflicts with animals that make it impossible to grant them equal rights without sacrificing basic human interests.¹ In this paper, I examine Warren's view and show why I believe it is mistaken. In particular, I am concerned with defending the idea that many animals have an equal right to life.²

1.1. WARREN'S ARGUMENT AGAINST EQUAL RIGHTS

According to Warren, animals do not have rights that are equal in strength to human rights. In particular, she holds that animals do not have an equal right to life. At most, Warren thinks that some animals may have some "weak" rights, which may or may not include a weak right to life. If Warren is correct, then it follows that although we have some moral duties to animals, our duties to them are not as strong as our duties to other humans. In particular, it follows that our duty not to kill animals, if indeed we have any such duty, is not as strong as our duty not to kill humans. This difference in strength means that there are some situations in which it is morally permissible to kill animals but in which it is not permissible to kill other humans. Indeed, Warren believes that in many cases it is permissible for humans to kill animals for food, though of course it is never permissible to treat other humans in this way. Later on, I examine more closely the specific duties that Warren thinks we do and do not have to animals.

Why, according to Warren, should we believe that animals do not have any equal rights, including an equal right to life? Warren's argument for her view begins with the premise that there are some situations in which the vital interests of humans and animals unavoidably conflict, such that it is impossible to avoid killing (or otherwise harming) animals without sacrificing human life or health. Warren's main example of this sort of conflict is the case of rodents who carry diseases that can harm and kill humans. When these rodents make

¹ As Warren puts it, "the primary justification" for denying equal moral status to animals (i.e., strong or equal rights) "is that inescapable practical realities make impossible always to treat nonhuman animals as moral equals." Mary Anne Warren, *Moral Status* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 225.

² In earlier papers, Warren has put forth other arguments in defense of her weak animal rights view. In her paper, "The Rights of the Nonhuman World," she argues that animals have, at most, only a weak right to life because life has less value for animals than humans. See Mary Anne Warren, "The Rights of the Nonhuman World," *Environmental Philosophy*, ed. Robert Elliot and Arran Gare (St. Lucia, Queensland and New York: University of Queensland Press, 1983). This is an important argument in itself, and I have sought to address this line of argument in other work. In this paper, however, I am concerned in particular with Warren's appeal to inevitable practical conflicts that we have with animals. In her book, *Moral Status*, this is the primary argument she makes in defense of her weak animal rights view.

homes in human environments, it becomes a serious threat to human well-being. Warren describes the problem:

Rodents of several species habitually live in proximity to humans. In doing so, they consume and contaminate food, and sometimes spread lethal diseases, such as bubonic plague—the “Black Death” of the Middle Ages, which is carried by fleas that live on rats. Rodents also have extraordinarily high reproductive rates. Thus, while we may be able to tolerate a few rodents in our homes and granaries, a policy of complete tolerance would often lead to disaster.³

Warren admits that there are sometimes non-lethal means of controlling rodent populations in human environments, such as through non-lethal traps and releasing the rodents elsewhere. However, she argues that non-lethal trapping and releasing is not always feasible. She explains, “The number of animals may be too great, and the task unmanageable.”⁴ If Warren’s description is correct, then this is a case in which it is impossible to avoid killing animals without sacrificing vital human interests of health and life.

In these situations in which the vital interests of humans conflict with those of animals, Warren contends that it is morally justifiable to kill (or otherwise harm) animals. It is justifiable to kill them, she thinks, because doing so is necessary to preserve human life and health. Warren suggests that this judgment is a matter of common sense. She states that no moral theory can be “a serious candidate for general acceptance . . . if its implementation would severely jeopardize human lives and health.”⁵

But even if it is sometimes justifiable to kill animals in these cases of conflict, it might be denied that this means that animals do not have an equal right to life. In particular, it might be argued that the only reason why it is justifiable to kill animals in these cases is because we must do so for the purpose of *self-defense*—that is, defense of our own life or the lives of other humans. Self-defense can also justify killing humans—for instance, if another human is attacking us and we must kill him or her in order to save our lives. Therefore, if the justification for killing animals in cases of conflict is merely one of self-defense, it would not justify the belief that animals do not have an equal right to life. In short, even if it is sometimes justifiable to kill animals in cases of conflict, it does not yet follow that animals do not have an equal right to life. It must also be shown that *if we had analogous conflicts with humans, it would not be justifiable to kill them.*

In making her argument, Warren considers this possible objection and she argues that killing disease-bearing rodents cannot be justified through self-defense. She states, “Lethal self-defense against another sentient human being

³ Warren, *Moral Status*, p. 116.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

is rarely permissible, unless that individual is engaging (perhaps innocently) in some immediately life-threatening activity.”⁶ Warren believes that disease-bearing rodents do not present a case of immediately life-threatening activity because “Rodents threaten human well-being through their very existence and mode of life: where they live, what they eat, and the pathogenic micro-organisms that they can carry.”⁷ Given an analogous conflict with other humans, Warren argues, it would not be justifiable to kill them. She states,

Comparable considerations would not justify launching a homicidal program against one’s human neighbours. If human neighbours unintentionally endanger our well-being through their mode of life, or the micro-organisms that they harbour, then we ought to discuss the problem with them, seek a mediator, or appeal to legal or moral authorities to enforce the standards of behaviour that have been breached.⁸

In this passage, Warren points to what she believes is a crucial difference between humans and animals: the fact that we are capable of reasoning with other humans in order to resolve our conflicts with them nonviolently, whereas we cannot reason in this way with animals. In Warren’s view, it is *not* self-defense but rather *this fact* about animals—the fact that we cannot reason with them to resolve our conflicts nonviolently—that justifies killing them in conflicts like the one we have considered. On the other hand, we are capable of reasoning with other humans, and for this reason, it is not justifiable to kill humans in analogous conflicts. Therefore, Warren concludes, we must accept that animals do not have equal rights.

1.2. WARREN ON OUR OBLIGATIONS TO ANIMALS

Although Warren denies that animals have any equal rights, she does believe that we have some moral obligations to animals. She goes so far as to say that we can speak of animals as having some rights, but that any rights they have are weaker than the rights of humans.⁹ In Warren’s view, our obligations to animals are determined primarily by what she calls the “Anti-Cruelty Principle.” This principle “requires that we take care not to inflict suffering or death upon sentient beings, unless there is no other feasible and morally legitimate way to further important human or ecological needs.”¹⁰

To properly evaluate the anti-cruelty principle, we must first know more precisely what this principle requires of us in terms of our practices toward

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., p. 229.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 225.

animals. One important question that must be answered is whether it is permissible for humans to kill animals for food. In Warren's view, it is in fact permissible for humans (or at least many of them) to kill animals for food. She argues that many people around the world have important nutritional, cultural, economic, or religious interests in eating meat, or in hunting or rearing animals for food, and that to compel them to abandon these practices "would be to violate their moral rights."¹¹

Warren also addresses the issue of hunting and killing animals for sport. She argues, first of all, that hunting animals for sport is justified "when it is the only way to control introduced animals that are harmful to indigenous plant or animal species, or indigenous animals that have been deprived of their natural predators."¹² Additionally, she asserts that "the values that some people find in hunting" may be great enough to justify hunting animals for sport, so long as it is "done in ways that are not cruel" and that are ecologically sustainable.¹³ What are these values that trump the lives of animals? Warren states,

Some hunters say that the experience is important to their spiritual and psychological well-being. For many, hunting is the primary way in which they have learned to enjoy the wilderness, and to feel part of it. For others, it represents an element of their culture that they think it important to retain, even if their subsistence does not depend upon it. Hunting or fishing, like collecting mushrooms or mussels, is for many a relaxing way to obtain food that is much enjoyed.¹⁴

Warren does suggest that we ought to respect the moral opinions of others (if it is feasible and the opinions are morally sound), and since some people morally oppose hunting, this is a reason to think that sport hunting should not be done.¹⁵ But ultimately, she concludes that sport hunting "need not fall below the minimum moral standard" if it is "done in ways that are not cruel, that do not damage species or ecosystems, and that do not endanger human beings or animal members of mixed communities [e.g., pets, farm animals]."¹⁶

Warren also discusses human practices of keeping captive or domesticated animals, such as in the case of animal agriculture. She argues that causing "needless pain or suffering" to these animals "is a violation of the anti-cruelty principle," and therefore, that we ought to cease "many practices that are now widespread, such as rearing highly sentient animals under conditions of excessive crowding and confinement."¹⁷

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 230–31.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 237.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 237–38.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 237.

¹⁵ Warren refers to this as the "transitivity of respect principle."

¹⁶ Warren, *Moral Status*, p. 238.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 234–37.

Finally, it is worth noting that Warren believes that we have stronger duties to certain groups of animals than to others. First, she argues, “we have stronger moral obligations towards animals that are members of our mixed social communities [e.g., domesticated animals] than towards equally sentient animals that do not have social relationships with human beings.”¹⁸ Additionally, she believes, “we are required to accept special obligations towards animals of species that are endangered by human activities, and important to the integrity of ecosystems of which they are part.”¹⁹ Finally, she suggests that we have stronger obligations to animals based on how highly sentient and intelligent they are. She states, “Only in the case of such highly sensitive and mentally sophisticated animals as cetaceans [e.g., dolphins], apes, and elephants, is it plausible to hold that it is virtually never morally permissible to treat them in ways that would violate their moral rights if they were human beings.”²⁰

II. CRITICISM OF WARREN’S VIEW

2.1. A FALSE ANALOGY

I now show why Warren’s argument fails to justify her view that animals do not have equal rights, including an equal right to life. As I have suggested, Warren’s view depends upon the thesis *that there exist circumstances in which it is justifiable to kill animals but not justifiable to kill humans*. Warren has argued that it is justifiable to kill rodents when they endanger human life through the spread of disease and there is no other feasible means of protecting ourselves. The question becomes whether it is justifiable to kill humans in analogous circumstances. As we saw, Warren claims that it is not justifiable to kill humans in analogous circumstances. She argues that if other humans unintentionally endanger our lives through the spread of disease, it is not justifiable to kill them; rather, we ought to use reason with them to resolve our conflict nonviolently.

One major problem with Warren’s argument is that in judging that it is not justifiable to kill humans in a conflict analogous to the rodent conflict, Warren fails to imagine a human conflict that is truly analogous to the rodent conflict that she describes. An integral part of the practical circumstances that make up our conflict with rodents is the fact that *we are largely unable to communicate and reason with them*. To truly imagine ourselves in an analogous conflict with other humans, we must imagine a situation in which it is the case not only that humans, like rodents, endanger our lives through their “very existence and mode of life,” but also that we are unable to communicate and reason with them.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 226. She refers to this as the “interspecific principle.”

¹⁹ Ibid. She refers to this as the “ecological principle.”

²⁰ Ibid., p. 229.

Imagine, for example, a human who jumps to an alternate dimension, and whose very existence in that dimension comes to pose a serious danger to humans in this dimension. This threat is not a most immediate one—people are not going to die at this very moment if nothing is done—but the threat is an ultimate one, meaning that if nothing is done, there will certainly be a disaster. The thing is, we haven't the faintest idea how to communicate across dimensions, so we can't exactly tell this person to jump back to our dimension (assuming he or she could). However, we do possess the means to destroy this dimension altogether, which would kill the person in that dimension but which seems to be our only feasible means of survival. There is no other non-harmful or non-lethal means of overcoming this threat. Here we have a situation more truly analogous to that of the disease-spreading rodents, for, as with the rodents, the practical circumstances include the inability to communicate or reason with the being who endangers us, and it is this person's "very existence" that threatens our own (i.e., there is no immediate threat). Moreover, although the threat is not an immediate one, it is an ultimate one, and it cannot be overcome through any non-harmful or non-lethal means. Would it be justifiable in this situation to kill this human in order to protect our basic well-being?

As another example, we can imagine a situation in which humans pose some serious but non-immediate threat to our basic well-being (perhaps, like rodents, through the spread of disease by microorganisms) and they simply refuse to reason with us to resolve their conflict with us nonviolently. Moreover, we can imagine that in this situation appeals to moral and legal authorities are also ineffective, and in short, that there is absolutely no way to avert the threat posed to us but through harmful or lethal means. Would it be justifiable in this situation to kill other humans in order to protect our basic well-being?

A conflict with other humans as serious as the case of disease-spreading rodents, with the added circumstance that we are unable to reason with these humans or resolve our conflict in any other non-harmful, non-lethal way, would, I believe, justify harming or killing those humans, no less than it would justify killing rodents in such a conflict. The only alternative would be to accept that, given such a conflict with humans, we must allow ourselves to be seriously harmed if not killed. But as Warren admits in the case of conflicts with animals, this alternative does not seem acceptable. What *is* acceptable, I believe, is that there can exist these extreme circumstances in which our basic well-being is endangered (immediately or non-immediately) by the actions of another being in a way that, for whatever reason, cannot be overcome through non-harmful or non-lethal means, and that, in these extreme circumstances, it is justifiable to harm or even possibly kill the being that endangers us because we must do so to protect ourselves from serious harm. *It matters not* whether this other being is human or an animal. What matters is that our basic well-being is threatened by some being in a way that absolutely cannot be overcome through any other means but to harm or kill that being.

From this conclusion, two important points should be drawn regarding how we really ought to look at the conflict with rodents that Warren describes. First, it is the *practical circumstances* of this conflict that are determining our judgments about whether it is justifiable to harm rodents, *not* any qualities of rodents that make them *less worthy* of moral treatment. In other words, the reason why it may be justified sometimes to use violence to resolve our conflicts with rodents is not because they have lesser moral worth or standing—not because they *deserve* less—but rather because, though we might like to, we simply are *unable* to reason with them.

It is noteworthy that in her defense of the view that animals have no equal rights, Warren is not arguing that animals are *less worthy* of or *less entitled* to moral treatment. Typically, philosophers who defend the view that animals have a lesser moral standing (e.g., that they lack rights or equal rights) will argue that animals have a lesser moral standing because they lack some quality of moral worth. For instance, it is sometimes argued that the possession of rational agency makes humans morally special, and that animals have a lesser moral standing because they lack this quality. Warren, however, is not making this kind of argument. She does point to animals' lack of rational agency as a crucial difference between them and humans. However, the significance of this difference is simply that it renders us incapable of nonviolently resolving some of our conflicts with animals without sacrificing our basic well-being. Warren's argument does not try to show that possessing rational agency makes humans morally more worthy, special, or deserving than animals.²¹

Recognition of this point leads us to a second point, which is that the particular circumstances that justify harming rodents in the example Warren gives are in fact ones of self-defense. As we saw, Warren argues that harming disease-spreading rodents cannot be justified by appeal to self-defense because the rodents do not present us with an immediate life threat. However, it is not clear that harming others can be justified through self-defense only when the threat they pose to us is clearly a most immediate one. Let us review the sort of threat we are supposedly considering in both the case of disease-spreading rodents and that of the human who has jumped dimensions. In neither case is

²¹ In "The Rights of the Nonhuman World," Warren does make the kind of argument which contends that animals are less entitled to moral treatment than humans (i.e., because they lack some quality of moral worth). In this paper, she suggests that animals have only a weak right to life because life has less value for them than humans. This line of argument has also been made by other philosophers, including Joel Feinberg and R. G. Frey (although Frey doesn't believe in moral rights, he suggests that animals have lesser moral standing because life has less value for them). See Feinberg, "Human Duties and Animal Rights," *The Fifth Day: Animal Rights and Human Ethics*, ed. Richard Knowles Morris and Michael W. Fox (Washington, D.C.: Acropolis Books, 1978). See also R. G. Frey, *Rights, Killing, and Suffering* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983). Although I do not agree with this line of argument (I have sought to defeat it in other, unpublished work), this is the kind of argument which needs to be made in attempt to justify the view that animals have only weak rights or weak moral standing. My point here is that Warren's argument in *Moral Status* does not make this kind of argument at all.

the threat clearly an immediate one, for in both cases, it seems that no one will immediately die or be harmed if nothing is done at the present moment to avert the threat. In other words, if it were scientifically feasible to try to reason with the beings that endanger us, there would be time to do so. However, in both cases, the threat is one that will soon cause us serious harm if we do nothing at all. Also, in both cases, the threat is supposed to be one that we absolutely cannot overcome through non-harmful or non-lethal means. Given these assumptions, we are ultimately faced with only two alternatives: (1) we can do nothing and ultimately suffer great harm, or (2) before we are harmed, we can seek to protect our basic well-being by harming our threat (as non-severely as we can without sacrificing our basic well-being). I fail to see how, given only these two alternatives, harming the threatening being cannot be justified through self-defense.²²

To be clear, my suggestion is that it is justifiable to harm rodents that threaten us through disease only if the risk of harm is high *and there is no non-harmful means of protecting ourselves*. In addition, I have argued that given a similar conflict with other humans, it is likewise justifiable to harm them. However, perhaps Warren would object that her point is not that there is absolutely no way of resolving our conflict with rodents nonviolently, but rather that the only available ways of doing so would be such an inconvenience that they are not worth pursuing. For example, Warren might argue that we could successfully live-trap all of the rodents if we really put ourselves to the task, or if the rodents are in our house, we could always just move to a different house, but that these options would require us to sacrifice too much, and therefore, that it is justifiable to harm or kill them instead. This approach would support Warren's view that animals have no equal rights if in analogous conflicts with humans in which the only non-harmful ways of resolving the conflict are just as inconvenient, the inconvenient options would be worth pursuing, and it would not be justifiable to harm or kill the threatening humans.

But if this is Warren's argument, then her argument is fundamentally incomplete, for if there are in fact ways in which we could resolve our conflicts with rodents without harming or killing them, and without endangering our basic well-being, then Warren needs to show why we should not pursue these options. That is, she needs to show why we should not make the sacrifices and endure any inconveniences that these options entail. She has not given us any such argument. If there are not any of these inconvenient options available,

²² In objection to my argument, it might be insisted that, in these cases of conflict, we should wait until the threat is a most immediate one before we seek to harm the threatening being, and only then is it justifiable to harm others through self-defense. In response, I would point out that in our conflicts with disease-bearing rodents, it is not clear that we will always be able to identify a moment when we are immediately threatened, since we are not able to see any diseases they may spread. If the risk of eventual harm to us is high, and if there really is no non-harmful means of avoiding this harm, then self-defense may justify as a precaution harming rodents that pose a near threat to our basic well-being. An analogous situation could also justify harming other humans.

then harming the rodents is justified through self-defense: we must harm them in order to protect ourselves from them. However, if there are some options available for conflict resolution that would not entail harming the rodents, and that would not endanger our own life and health, then Warren's argument loses the force of the assumption that we absolutely *must* harm the rodents in order to protect our basic well-being. Her conclusion that it is justifiable to harm or kill rodents is no longer uncontroversial. In this case, we need to know why we should think that the inconvenience of not harming animals outweighs the worth of those animals' lives and well-being.²³

2.2. A MISSING JUSTIFICATION

This conclusion brings us to a second major problem with Warren's view. I have just shown that Warren's argument does not justify denying equal rights to animals. Consequently, her argument also fails to justify her views regarding our specific duties to animals, namely, that it is permissible in many cases for humans to kill animals for food and sport. As we have seen, Warren's argument is that we are justified in denying equal rights to animals because doing so is necessary to preserve important human interests. As one example of such a situation, Warren points to the case of rodents that threaten human life through the spread of disease. Likewise, Warren argues that killing animals for food and sport also is necessary to preserve important human interests, and therefore, that it too is justified in many cases. As we saw, these "important human interests" include cultural, spiritual, economic, and enjoyment interests in eating meat, rearing animals for food, subsistence hunting, and hunting animals for sport too.

Warren's argument is misleading, however, because it misses a crucial distinction between *self-defensive* and *offensive* killing. As I have argued, Warren's justification for killing rodents depends on whether the killing is one of self-defense. However, contrary to the case of rodents threatening us with disease, killing animals for food or sport clearly cannot be justified through self-defense, even if it serves important human interests that otherwise would be sacrificed. It cannot be justified through self-defense because in killing animals for food or sport, we are not protecting ourselves from any threat that

²³ It could be objected that I have reduced the complexity of Warren's overall position into an unnecessarily dualistic choice between (1) doing nothing and being harmed by the threatening rodents or (2) harming our threat before being harmed ourselves. However, this criticism is misguided. My point is that if these are the only two options, then, contrary to Warren, harming the rodents is justified through self-defense. If these are not the only two options—and there is a third option according to which it is possible to keep ourselves from being harmed by the rodents without harming the rodents—then Warren has failed to show why we are justified in harming the rodents, since our basic well-being is no longer absolutely at stake.

they pose to us, but rather we are offensively aggressing against them to serve our interests or wants.²⁴

So what then is the justification for killing animals for food or sport? It becomes apparent that Warren has not given us any such justification. She argues that killing animals for food and sport serves important human interests. However, serving important human interests does not justify killing other humans who do not pose any threat to us. This is what it means for humans to have a right to life. So, why does serving important human interests justify the offensive killing of animals? Warren fails to give us any argument to consider. Any argument must point to some difference between humans and animals that justifies the offensive killing of animals.

III. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have sought to show why Warren fails to justify denying equal rights to animals. Warren argues that the activities of animals sometimes conflict with the vital interests of humans, and that in these cases of conflict, it is sometimes justifiable to kill these animals. She contends further that it is not justifiable to kill humans in analogous conflicts. The main example she uses to support her argument is that of rodents that threaten human life through the spread of disease. Among the conclusions that Warren makes from her argument is that it is frequently justifiable to kill animals for food or sport.

In response to Warren's argument, I have argued that Warren fails to justify denying equal rights to animals because she fails to show that it is not justifiable to kill humans in conflicts analogous to the rodent conflict. A truly analogous conflict with humans would entail that we are unable to reason with them or use any other non-lethal means to avert the threat they pose to us. Given

²⁴ It could be objected that since self-defense involves protecting one's important interests (e.g., life, basic bodily security), perhaps it could be argued that eating meat and hunting are important enough interests for some people that it would be self-defense to resist attempts to interfere with these activities. In reply to this argument, it is not clear to me, first of all, that it could be successfully argued that eating meat and hunting are important enough interests for anyone to enter the realm of what we might call "self-defensive interests." However, more importantly, even if these interests are sufficiently important for some people, the act of killing animals to promote these interests still would not count as killing in self-defense. Killing in self-defense entails killing a being who is threatening one's important interests. However, in this case, the animals being killed are not themselves posing any threat to important human interests. They are not aggressing against human beings, but rather it is the humans who are aggressing against the animals. It seems to me that even in a case in which a person is stranded in the wilderness and starving to death, killing an animal (or another human being, for that matter) would not be justifiable through self-defense (unless the animal was attacking the person), since again, it would be an aggressive killing in which the animal itself is not threatening the person. Whether killing in this case could be justified through some other means (e.g., a natural right to survive) is another question, although personally I don't believe it could be.

these conditions, there would be cases in which it is justifiable to kill humans who threaten our basic well-being despite the fact that the threat is not a most immediate one. I concluded that any justification that Warren has offered for killing rodents or other animals is only one of self-defense, and pertains not to the actual moral worth or deservedness of animals but rather just to the unfortunate practical circumstances and limitations of our conflicts with them.

Following this argument, I pointed out that Warren fails to provide any real justification for her view that it is justifiable to kill animals for food or sport. Killing animals for food or sport is very unlike Warren's case of disease-spreading rodents in that the animals killed for food or sport do not pose any sort of threat to us, and thus, it is not a case of self-defense but rather a case of offensive, aggressive killing. Warren simply fails to give us any sort of justification for this kind of killing of animals.

It might be asked whether my argument against Warren's view has focused too narrowly on one example of a practical conflict that we have with animals, namely, the rodent conflict. However, my argument has the same result for any other practical conflict between humans and animals. If we are faced with a conflict with animals in which we must harm or kill the animals in order to avoid being harmed by the animals, then the justification for harming them is self-defense, which equally can justify harming or killing humans. If, however, it is possible to avoid being harmed by the animals without harming or killing them, then Warren fails to show why it is justifiable to harm or kill the animals. In this case, some additional argument must be given to show why it is permissible to harm or kill the animals. Warren's thought that there are inevitable practical conflicts between animals and the basic welfare of humans does not, by itself, do the job.