

Do Pigs Want Freedom?

The Prime Minister's piggery was recently raided to dramatize the suffering of livestock. The arrest of Peter Singer, a leading bioethicist, for trespass, and his justification by Helga Kuhse, once more places animal liberation in the limelight.

The rescue of Mr Keating's pigs was admittedly a media-directed gesture. As Singer put it, "the condition of his pigs is properly a national issue." But let us be candid. It was also a gesture without promise of relief for the pigs. What would the compassionate commandos actually do with several hundred porkers had the rescue succeeded? They cannot be kept as pets in the urban dwellings of their benefactors. They also cannot be returned to their natural habitat because they have none: pigs, like all domestic plants and animals, were long since bred to human dependency. Their release into a natural habitat would result in their rapid demise from predators, from starvation, from shooting as pests, and from automobile traffic.

Imagine now the liberation not of a hundred pigs only, but millions of livestock. The slaughter, not to mention the nuisance, would be immense. For what? To prevent animal suffering. Once again do-goodism would produce the opposite of what is intended.

The claim that farmed pigs suffer is indisputable for the simple reason that all vertebrates and possibly all invertebrates experience pain. The relevant question is whether on balance the domestic pig's life is of better "quality" than life in the wild. What warrants the view that pigs prefer freedom to the farmer's total welfare habitat? Has Helga Kuhse, who praises pig intelligence, consulted them about their wishes?

Animal advocates who recognize that freeing livestock must result in their slaughter would avoid this outcome by slowly phasing out animal husbandry. Their extinction as species would be the result, yet environmentalists profess to protect biodiversity.

It is claimed that animals are entitled to moral standing because they suffer. The consequence of this view, for those who accept it, goes well beyond the economics of replacing primary industry. Are we not obliged to extend veterinary service to the entire animal kingdom, or at least that part of it in our immediate environment? Health ministers acutely aware of nation's shortfall in managing human suffering are not likely to warm to the idea of opening hundreds of veterinary hospitals and animal

sanctuaries at public expense. Taxpayers would probably bellow at the inequity in health care allocation.

While philosophers say much about human duties to animals, they are silent about animal duties to humans. However intelligent pigs may be, they lack a sense of duty. Here is the relevant species difference that Singer and Kuhse profess themselves unable to find. Their view that suffering alone entitles animals to moral standing is itself a manifestation of the “speciesism” that they decry: only humans can deplore the suffering of animals. Carnivorous plants and animals dine without any concern for the suffering of their prey. Some—your pet cat among them—seem to delight in tormenting their victims. Oceanic benevolence for animal suffering is a luxury affordable only in the safe havens of a civilisation that must cultivate plants and animals to sustain itself.

Farmers may understand better than philosophers the moral relation between ourselves and the environment. There is a delicate balance between symbiosis and competition. Among the competitors are lovable creatures such as the kangaroo, who must be culled in large numbers if crops and livestock are to survive. Left to themselves, they would eat their way out of a living and cause serious land degradation before perishing in a population crash that reduced their numbers to sustainable levels.

While urban philosophers may be pardoned faulty ecology, they are accountable for their logic. Alas, their logic is not much better than their biology. They claim to be vegetarians on principle. Yet their principles interdict only eating flesh that has been made to suffer unnecessarily. Animals who perish from natural causes, or were culled of necessity, are fair game for the table. If in addition one is a utilitarian, there is no reason for excluding human flesh from a rational diet. Singer, who is a utilitarian, acknowledges this consequence of his ethics, but leaves it unexplored because the idea is “aesthetically repugnant,” as he delicately styles it. It is disappointing that a philosopher should lose his nerve before a common prejudice. Enlightenment would be served, and the character of his principles would be more apparent, if he promoted the cause of dietetic cannibalism.

It is frequently objected to Singer and Kuhse that although they hold the infliction of suffering to be unethical unless it is willed by the creature who suffers, they make an exception to approve abortion and infanticide. The unborn child has no say in the termination of its life—as with animal husbandry, informed consent is not sought.

But terminations from ten weeks onwards are acutely painful, as judged from ultrasound imaging. Consistency would require Singer to oppose elective abortion until a painless method is introduced. Meanwhile he should join Rev. Nile's vigils at abortion clinics. But again the logic of his position takes its toll. If he approves killing the unborn, provided that it is painless, why is it not permissible for the farmer painlessly to slaughter livestock?

Kuhse, in constructing her indictment of farming, notes that the use of reproductive technology enables pig farmers to litter about 50 piglets a year. She expresses dismay that the hapless Miss Piggy has been turned into "a living reproductive machine."

With this statement the inconsistencies of Monash bioethics assume epic dimensions. Singer and Kuhse have been unwavering supporters of hi-tech babymaking. They do not countenance objections to the commercial exploitation of involuntary childlessness, injury to parental relationships, and like objections. But substitute "animal" for "human infant" and their moral vision switches from cold rejection to oceanic compassion.

Animal libbers are to be thanked for blowing the whistle on gratuitous medical and commercial cruelty to animals. Their efforts have improved the conditions of animals and made us aware of the atrocious things done in the name of medical research. But the wholesale attack on animal husbandry expresses a selective indignation at odds with the facts of life. They seem to forget that we are finite beings who do not have inexhaustible reservoirs of sympathy for all suffering creatures. They illustrate this limitation by sanctioning the killing of large numbers of vulnerable human beings. It is time to reorder our priorities to bring vulnerable human beings back into the circle of compassion while continuing to cultivate appreciation of our animal friends.

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