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The Replaceability Argument in the Ethics of Animal Husbandry

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Synonyms

[Conscientious omnivorism](#); [Happy meat](#); [Sustainable meat production](#)

Introduction

Most people agree that inflicting unnecessary suffering upon animals is wrong. Many fewer people, including among ethicists, agree that painlessly killing animals is necessarily wrong. The most commonly cited reason is that death (without pain, fear, distress) is not bad for them in a way that matters morally or not as significantly as it does for persons, who are self-conscious, make long-term plans, and have preferences about their own future. Animals, at least those that are not persons, lack a morally significant interest in continuing to live. At the same time, some argue that existence itself can be good, insofar as one's life is worth living. For animals, a good life can offset a quick, if early, death. So, it seems to follow that breeding happy animals that will be (prematurely) killed can be a good thing overall. Insofar as

slaughter and sale makes it economically sustainable to raise new ones, who would otherwise not exist, raising and killing animals for food who will have lives worth living is good overall. It benefits them as well as consumers and makes the world better by adding to the sum of happiness. The process of raising and killing animals with positive welfare produces a sequence of replacement that maintains or increases overall welfare, all else being equal (assuming in particular no overall negative impact on the welfare of other parties). Call this the *replaceability argument* (RA) and the ensuing controversy the *replaceability problem* (RP). This is a problem at the crossroads of the ethics of killing, agricultural ethics, procreation ethics, and population ethics. Peter Singer gave the idea its most precise and controversial formulation in *Practical Ethics* (2011: Chapter 5), first published in 1979.

History of the Problem

In 1789, in the *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, Bentham (1907) wrote:

If the being eaten were all, there is very good reason why we should be suffered to eat such of them [animals] as we like to eat: we are the better for it, and they are never the worse. They have none of those long-protracted anticipations of future misery which we have. The death they suffer in our hands commonly is, and always may be, a speedier, and by that means a less painful one, than that which would await them in the inevitable course of nature...

[W]e should be the worse for their living, and they are never the worse for being dead. But is there any reason why we should be suffered to torment them? Not any that I can see. Are there any why we should *not* be suffered to torment them? Yes, several.

Bentham went on to formulate his oft-quoted criterion for equal consideration:

It may come one day to be recognized, that the number of the legs, the villosity of the skin, or the termination of the *os sacrum*, are reasons equally insufficient for abandoning a sensitive being to the same fate. What else is it that should trace the insuperable line? . . . the question is not, Can they *reason?* nor, Can they *talk?* but, Can they *suffer?* (Bentham 1907: XVII.1)

Bentham, the founder of classical utilitarianism, appears to endorse a version of RA: painlessly killing animals makes everyone better off than they would otherwise be – it does not harm them – meat eaters are better for it. Given the more sophisticated cognition of mature human beings, killing them requires stronger justifications, although Bentham believed the main reason against murder lied in the terror (foreclosed to animals) it would induce in *other* people.

Early animal rights advocate Henry Salt, despite Bentham's influence, called RA "the logic of the larder" (1914). Salt was responding to the essayist Leslie Stephen's (1896) argument against vegetarianism:

Of all the arguments for Vegetarianism none is so weak as the argument from humanity. The pig has a stronger interest than anyone in the demand for bacon. If all the world were Jewish, there would be no pigs at all.

Salt took Stephen's remark to be premised on a fallacy:

It is often said, as an excuse for the slaughter of animals, that it is better for them to live and to be butchered than not to live at all. Now, obviously, if such reasoning justifies the practice of flesh-eating, it must equally justify *all* breeding of animals for profit or pastime, when their life is a fairly happy one. . . . In fact . . . there is hardly any treatment that cannot be justified by the supposed terms of such a contract. Also, the argument must apply to mankind. . . . The fallacy lies in the confusion of thought which attempts to compare existence with non-existence. A person who is already in existence may feel that he would rather have lived than not, but he must first have the *terra firma* of existence to

argue from; the moment he begins to argue as if from the abyss of the non-existent, he talks nonsense, by predicating good or evil, happiness or unhappiness, of that of which we can predicate nothing. (Salt 1914: 221–222)

Peter Singer, in the first edition of *Animal Liberation* (1975: Chapter 6), agreed with Salt. He changed his view while writing *Practical Ethics* (first published in 1979, revised in 1993 and 2011), influenced by ingenious arguments put forward in the late 1970s by Derek Parfit about impersonal wrongs and the widely discussed "nonidentity problem" (1984: 351–374). Based on the fictional case of two prospective mothers and medical programs (367), Parfit showed that one could act wrongly without harming anyone in particular. Despite a plausible asymmetry between harms and benefits, and the fact that parents are under no *obligation* to bring to life a child whose existence will very likely be happy, one needs to explain why it is wrong to bring a miserable being into existence (even one who would otherwise not exist) yet not equally good to bring a happy being into existence. "Sound explanations for this," Singer and Mason wrote, "are extraordinarily difficult to find" (2006: 252). It may be at most "morally neutral" (optional), but it is at least good.

Structure of the Argument

In its basic form, RA states that one can increase or maximize value in the world (happiness, pleasure, preference satisfaction, objective list) by increasing the number of happy or fulfilled sentient beings. Applied to farming, it states that humanely raised animals (HRAs) that live pleasant lives and can be killed without pain and distress can be replaced, without loss, by new HRAs, which thus offset the good prevented by the killing. Humanely raising and killing animals benefits animals, consumers, and the world.

There are two ways to interpret the offsetting of an early death by a good life: either animals are *personally* better off with a happy, if short life, than with no life at all or, even if the personal harm of death is not offset by the benefit of existence,

the *impersonal* marginal benefit “for the world” offsets the total sum of personal harms. Each interpretation requires different arguments: either to the effect that death does not significantly harm animals (so the net sum of personal benefits minus harms for the individual is positive) or that impersonal benefits may override personal harms (so the overall sum of benefits minus harms, for all affected, is positive). Either way, one has to show that the total benefits of eating meat outweigh the costs to animals (McMahan 2008).

Contemporary Applications

In the context of intensified industrialized farming, critiques and alternative methods have flourished. A popular trend in animal husbandry, espoused by food writers, celebrity farmers, and academics, focuses on the possibility of eating better *and* treating animals better – in part by eating fewer of them. “Conscientious,” “ethical,” or “compassionate” omnivores embrace the humane, pasture-based, grass-fed, and, oftentimes, organic and local production of meat as a sustainable solution in the ailments of the modern Western diet. Humane husbandry and a conscientious omnivore diet minimize environmental damage, animal suffering, and public health issues while preserving a (culturally, aesthetically, and economically) worthwhile practice. Animals, in exchange for life and care, offer us their own life. Ethically produced meat ideally comes from free-ranging animals who enjoyed (slightly) extended life spans (allowing animals to live their expected natural life span would dramatically increase market prices), increased outdoor access, environmental enrichment, a more natural diet (grass, organic cereals, fruits, vegetables, roots), and social relations. Contemporary practitioners and/or advocates include Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall (2004), Nicolette Niman, Joel Salatin (Polyface Farms), Michael Pollan (2006), and Allan Savory, among others.

There is another purported benefit of husbandry to animals. Its end would not only deprive billions of future *individuals* of a good life, it would ultimately mean phasing out entire

domesticated *species* and *breeds*. Thus, Pollan writes, chickens “depend for their well-being on the existence of their human predators. Not the individual chicken, perhaps, but Chicken – the species. The surest way to achieve the extinction of the species would be to grant chickens a right to life.” (2006: 322). This is assuming, controversially, that limited populations of such breeds or species would not thrive in the wild or sanctuaries. This is also suggesting, again controversially, that these kinds have intrinsic value and lack wild counterparts. Moreover, RA only applies to those individuals and kinds that would not exist otherwise, hence, for instance, not to wild-caught fish or independently reproducing game. Finally, any given type of agriculture will affect the number, species, and well-being of the animals that will exist on the land used or converted (Matheny and Chan 2005). There is also a widespread assumption that domestication is an advantageous bargain for animals, insofar as husbandry provides for their needs, food, shelter, veterinary care, and protection against predators and diseases and ensures the reproductive success of the population (Budiansky 1999; Pollan 2006), but as section “*Philosophical Controversy*” shows, such comparisons involve complicated metaphysical questions.

In the actual world, RA strikes more directly at veganism than ovo-lacto-vegetarianism, since producing dairy, eggs, and other animal by-products cannot be dissociated from killing, in part because the profitability of livestock depends on the marketability of by-products and because male calves and chicks and spent females are not useful to the industry. Critics, on the other hand, point out that, even granting its validity, the logic of the larder does not entail that such practices will be morally acceptable. RA entails, at best, that one *could* hypothetically have reasons to eat animals – with meat probably becoming a luxury good (McMahan 2008). But further obstacles stand in the way of even heirloom husbandry: the unreliability of labels; inevitability of slaughterhouses for animals raised for commercial purposes; limitations of mobile slaughter units and gruesomeness of “backyard butchers” (McWilliams 2015); reduced life spans; mother-

offspring separation; castration, clipping, docking, and other mutilations; increased mortality and morbidity rates; and environmental concerns (waste, GHG emissions, land and water use), let alone empirical and ethical uncertainties regarding the badness of death for real and hypothetical HRAs (Višak and Garner 2016). Singer and Mason (2006) note: “[humanely raised] cattle, like all the animals we eat, died while still very young. They might have lived several more years before meeting one of these other forms of death, years in which they matured, experienced sexual intercourse, and, if they were females, cared for their children” (253). Therefore, even without granting animals a right to life, RA does not settle by itself the permissibility of the current humane omnivore diet.

Philosophical Controversy

Philosophers accepting RA (e.g., Hare 1999; Scruton 2004; Singer 2011; Varner 2012) assume at least a version of these two claims: death is not a significant harm to nonperson animals; existence is better than nonexistence (for HRAs, other sentient beings, and/or from the point of view of the universe). Singer and Varner also accept that these may be matters of degree.

Hare, Singer’s mentor at Oxford, considered Stephen’s comparison very sensible: “happy existing people are certainly glad they exist, and so are presumably comparing their existence with a possible non-existence” (1999: 239). If he were to choose between the life of a trout in a small farm in the English countryside and never existing, Hare would certainly “prefer the life, all told, of such a fish, to that of almost any fish in the wild, and to non-existence” (240).

Singer (2011: Chapter 5) now accepts that a good if short life is better than nonexistence. Sentient life even has a preference-independent (objective) value, such that more good lives are better than either a less happy or a non-sentient universe. These claims are even easier for Singer to accept now that he espouses *hedonistic act-utilitarianism* (Lazari-Radek and Singer 2014): the permissibility of a given act of killing

depends on the overall resulting balance of enjoyment and suffering. On this view, persons are also replaceable, although, given the richness of their lives and the numerous side effects, not as easily as merely sentient beings (also see Varner 2012).

Distinctions

At the crux of RP stand unresolved questions in moral theory, applied ethics, and axiology (Višak and Garner 2016): When is death a harm? What is the relevant point of comparison to assess (momentary or lifetime) welfare? How does a short happy life compare with nonexistence, life in the wild, or a longer life? Each comparison has its own complications, including nonidentity problems between wild and domesticated animals, different generations, and different life stages of individuals.

The theoretical application of RA to nonperson animals, but not to persons (self-conscious, rational, and autonomous), hinges on the assumption that death is normally distinctively bad for the latter if their lives are worth living. Death can be a tragedy only for persons. RA thus rests on two central distinctions: *suffering* versus *death* and *persons* versus *nonpersons*, which may explain why many people opposing animal suffering do not necessarily oppose the killing of animals for food, and why people who would consider killing human beings, including anencephalic children, for horrific medical research generally accept experimenting on at least as sentient nonhumans. Non-speciesists substitute persons/nonpersons for humans/nonhumans, since some nonhumans can be persons (e.g., great apes and cetaceans) and not all humans are persons (e.g., fetuses and anencephalic children). Even a non-speciesist can therefore deny that the death of a cow and the death of a *normal* human being are on a par, given their different cognitive capacities (Bentham 1907; Singer 2011; Varner 2012).

Metaphysical Issues

Utilitarian versions of RA depend on the crucial assumption that the interests of nonexisting beings matter – not simply those of beings that do exist or will exist (regardless of one’s choices) but also those of beings who *would* exist *if* one

chose to bring them into existence (i.e., whose existence and identity depend on one's choices). The question is whether the interests of already conceived future children matter like those of *merely possible* children. If interests count only once one has determined that a being will exist, it is problematic to balance the interests of possible farm animals against their interests if they exist. Critics of RA say one ought to ensure existing animals are made as happy as possible when they are alive but ought not to make as many happy beings as possible (Višak 2013).

RA proponents can press that acknowledging that existence can be good implies that existence can be *better* than nonexistence (benefit) and hence that nonexistence can be worse (harm). RA opponents insist that nonexisting beings have no welfare so there is no one for whom existing is better than never existing. Existence, on this view, is an *absolute*, i.e., non-comparative, benefit. Secondly, accepting that *existing* beings can prefer their existence to nonexistence does not commit one to accept that *merely possible* beings would prefer a short happy life to no life at all. In fact, preferring existence to never existing may as well count *against* killing (no longer existing). It is an open question whether absolute benefits can compensate for harms such as death, but it is plausible that happy animals, if they were in a position to assess such benefits and harms, would prefer life to death. They would, moreover, not be swayed by the fact that, had one not planned to kill them, they would not exist, since existence is not a comparative benefit.

Utilitarianism

Hare (1999: 239–239) makes a clear utilitarian case for replaceability:

doing wrong to animals must involve harming them. If there is no harm, there is no wrong. Further, it has to be harm overall; if a course of action involves some harms but greater benefits, and there is no alternative with a greater balance of good over harm, it will not be wrong. We have to ask, therefore, whether the entire process of raising animals and then killing them to eat causes them more harm overall than benefit. My answer is that, assuming, as we must assume if we are to keep the “killing” argument distinct from the “suffering”

argument, that they are happy while they live, it does not. For it is better for an animal to have a happy life, even if it is a short one, than no life at all.

Although, existence is not “a benefit in itself,” “it is a necessary condition for having the benefits that we can have only if we are alive” (239). Existence can be compared (and preferred) to nonexistence and existence allows for more preferences to be satisfied. Hare endorses *total* (as opposed to average and person-affecting) *utilitarianism* – i.e., we ought to “maximize the total amount of preference-satisfaction that is had in the world . . . and distribute it impartially.” Painlessly killing animals, as opposed to making them suffer, does not frustrate their preferences. Assuming there are no uncompensated negative side effects, the permissibility of killing thus depends on “how many live animals, of different species including the human, we ought to cause there to be” or, more accurately, the number of quality-adjusted life years (QALYs) (239). Hare concludes that traditional “organic” husbandry (replaceability), especially in parts of the world where growing crops is impractical, is *optimific*. Note that Hare's argument is stronger than Singer's theoretical endorsement of replaceability. It states not only that replacing animals is permissible, but that it is *required* when *optimific*. Lazari-Radek and Singer (2014) have recently come closer to such a view (hedonism aside).

As is clear, RA follows naturally from certain versions of utilitarianism. In fact, Pollan's (2006) defense of meat, besides its empirical and axiological assumptions (predation as symbiosis; species matter more than individuals), echoes utilitarian commitments (Singer and Mason 2006: 252). Replaceability is, indeed, a crucial ground for deontological and rights-based objections to utilitarianism, insofar as the latter sees individuals as replaceable “*receptacles of value*” (pleasurable experiences) (Regan 1983). Yet, while RA squares well with utilitarianism, rejecting its conclusion need not entail rejecting utilitarianism.

Further distinctions are necessary here. There are personal and impersonal values, which can be

ranked differently. A state of affair can be impersonally good independently of its goodness-for-particular beings, from what Sidgwick called “the point of view of the universe.” The existence of more happy animals might be impersonally better even if it were better for no one in particular. On the other hand, states of affairs can be personally better or worse for those existing in such states. Happy/long lives are better for cows than short/miserable lives. So, a state of affairs could be personally worse than its alternatives while being impersonally better: e.g., replaceability is worse for cows, who live shorter lives than they could and are not better off for existing, but the world is better in virtue of containing more happiness than a world of irreplaceable cows.

On *total impersonal* utilitarianism, impartiality requires that one weighs the interests of actual (present and future) beings and possible beings equally, in proportion to their strength rather than whose interests they are. But several authors emphasize the compatibility of prior-existence/person-affecting utilitarianism (let alone rule consequentialism) with the irreplaceability of persons or of all sentient beings. They assume, as mentioned earlier, that nonexistent animals have no welfare, so they cannot be harmed or benefitted by existence or nonexistence. The interests of possible beings thus do not matter as much, if at all, as those of actual beings (Sapontzis 1987; Višák 2013; cf. Parfit’s 1984 and Singer’s 2011 [1979, 1993] discussion). These views thus reject a central tenet of RA.

Both person-affecting and impersonal views may have bullets to bite. The former are hard-pressed to account for the intrinsic wrongness of breeding animals that will undergo lives of suffering, if one cannot be harmed by being brought into existence. Of course, once one exists, it is wrong to be made to suffer. But one lacks *direct* reasons, on the person-affecting view, to avoid breeding animals that will have miserable lives as a result of genetic defects or induced disabilities. *Wide*-person-affecting views, however, offer interesting resources (Višák 2013). On the other hand, purely impersonal views cannot easily account for the intrinsic wrongness of killing and involve comparisons between states of affairs that

are not straightforwardly meaningful from the point of view of those they affect. They can accept that not breeding conscious animals has neutral (neither positive nor negative) value. But they cannot make a difference between the good that is achieved by prolonging an existing being’s life and creating beings that would not otherwise have existed. Moreover, *hedonistic* impersonal utilitarians lack resources to account for the distinctive wrongness of killing persons except in terms of their side effects on other parties and the relative richness of their future lives, all of which can be compensated for on such views. Singer’s changing views over the editions of *Practical Ethics* are representative of these difficulties. His recent shift from preference utilitarianism to hedonism deprives him of his previous arguments for the irreplaceability of persons.

To conclude, RP thus leaves us with the theoretical challenge of providing a compelling case for the replaceability of nonpersons that does not apply to persons. Most authors either accept replaceability for *both* persons and nonpersons (Lazari-Radek and Singer 2014; Varner 2012) or deny it for both (Višák 2013). Further, practically, RP does not settle all of the morally relevant aspects of animal husbandry. The best defense of conscientious omnivores rests on several empirical and philosophical assumptions still being hotly debated (McWilliams 2015; Višák and Garner 2016).

Conclusion

Controversies regarding the ethics of animal husbandry and eating meat sometimes revolve around the idea of replaceability, namely, that killing certain animals can be permissible insofar as they live pleasant lives and are replaced by new animals with equally pleasant lives. The controversies touch upon foundational issues in moral theory, practical ethics, as well as contemporary discussions of “ethical,” “conscientious,” or “humane” omnivores.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Meat: Ethical Considerations](#)
- ▶ [Peter Singer and Food](#)
- ▶ [Sustainability and Animal Agriculture](#)
- ▶ [Vegetarianism](#)

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