

Is it Bad to Kill Animals?

Elizabeth Harman argues against “The Surprising Claim”:

The Surprising Claim:

- (a) We have strong reasons not to cause intense pain to animals: the fact that an action would cause intense pain to an animal makes the action wrong unless it is justified by other considerations; and
- (b) We do not have strong reasons not to kill animals: it is not the case that killing an animal is wrong unless it is justified by other considerations.

See the Scruton article “Eating our Friends” for an argument defending the surprising claim. [Note that in Harman, animals sometimes seems to mean *non-human animals*, and sometimes *animals* generally.]

Argument against the Surprising Claim (728):

1. If it is true that we have strong moral reasons against causing intense pain to animals, such that doing so is impermissible unless justified by other considerations, then part of the explanation of this truth is that animals have moral status.
2. If it is true that we have strong moral reasons against causing intense pain to animals, such that doing so is impermissible unless justified by other considerations, then part of the explanation of this truth is that significantly harming something with moral status is impermissible unless justified by other considerations.
3. If an action painlessly kills a healthy animal in the prime of life, then that action significantly harms the animal.
4. If it is true that we have strong moral reasons against causing pain to animals, such that doing so is impermissible unless justified other considerations then painlessly killing a healthy animal in the prime of life is impermissible unless justified by other considerations (1,2,3).
5. Therefore, the Surprising Claim is false (4).

Response 1 (728): Death is bad for an animal. But it doesn’t harm an animal to kill it (painlessly) after a life in which the animal is well cared for, because one does not harm someone by depriving him/her/it of something good.

- What is it to harm something? Note the difference between harming and failing to benefit.
- Is harming something just a matter of causing that thing bad experiences?
- “Actively and physically interfering with [an animal] in such a way that [it] is deprived of a benefit does typically harm that [animal]. (729)
- When is the animal harmed, if painlessly caused to die?

Response 2 (730):

- (i) The death of a person is bad for her only because it frustrates her desires and plans for the future.
- (ii) Therefore, death is bad in general only because it frustrates desires and plans.
- (iii) Animals do not have desires and plans for the future.
- (iv) Therefore, animals' deaths are not bad for them.

Problem: (i) is false because someone’s future may be good for him/her/it, even if he/she/it doesn’t have plans and desires for it.

Response 3 (731):

It is true that animal pain matters morally. But it is a mistake to conclude that this is because *animals* have moral status. Rather, animals lack moral status. But *stages* of animals have moral status. Animal

pain matters morally because an animal stage is in pain. What is better or worse for the *animal* does not matter morally, though what is better or worse for stages of it does. (731)

Response 4 (734): McMahon's "Time Relative Interests View"

We have strong reasons against causing animal pain, and we have some reasons against painlessly killing animals in the prime of life, but these reasons are weakened by animals' lack of deep psychological continuity over time.

On this view, we may have weak reasons not to kill animals, but not strong ones.

Problem: the fact that non-human animals have a weak connect to their futures does not show that they don't have an interest in a long and healthy future. Consider the examples of Billy and Tommy.

Harman, Elizabeth. "The Moral Significance of Animal Pain and Animal Death." Chapter 26 in *The Oxford Handbook of Animal Ethics*. Edited by Tom L. Beauchamp, and R.G. Frey. Oxford University Press, 2011.

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