ARGUMENT

Whatever It Is We Owe to Animals, It’s Not to Eat Them

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Abstract: In an article published in the Journal of the American Philosophical Association, Nick Zangwill (2021) argues that “eating meat is morally good” (p. 295). It is “our duty” to eat animals, he says, “when it is part of a practice that has benefited animals” (Zangwill, 2021, p. 295). Since certain animals can be said to exist in some sense only because of meat-eating practices, and those practices benefit animals if they have good lives, argues Zangwill, that’s why we owe it to the animals to eat them—it is our moral duty. I carefully dissect this crude argument into its components and debunk its conclusion.

Key Words: carnivorism, vegetarianism, eating meat, possible lives, welfare interests, duty, animal rights, consequentialism

That eating animals constitutes a harm has by now largely leaked into public opinion. Only rarely do meat eaters deny that. Those who do deny it usually do so on the grounds of an assumed variance in consciousness or ability to suffer between human and nonhuman animals. Hardly anyone, however, has the audacity to argue that killing animals actually does them good, and that therefore we must continue eating meat. Hardly anyone apart from Nick Zangwill (2021), that is, who, in a recent article published in the Journal of the American Philosophical Association, argues that “eating meat is morally good primarily because it benefits animals” (p. 256). Why think—withholding a myriad of environmental reasons to the opposite—that eating meat is good? Eating meat benefits animals, says Zangwill (2021), because the existence of animals of [the domesticated] kind depends on human beings eating animals of its kind. . . . Domesticated animals exist in the numbers that they do only if there is a practice of eating them. For example, the many millions of sheep in New Zealand . . . exist only because we have a practice of eating them. The meat-eating practice benefits them greatly. Therefore, we should eat them. (p. 256).

One’s modus ponens is another’s modus tollens. Let me unpack and debunk his argument.

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Nick Zangwill's (2021) argument hinges on the anticipated pleasure of hypothetical animals—future animals—that will someday exist because of animal breeding for meat production. He says, “Eating meat is creating life. It brings into existence beings with valuable states of consciousness” (Zangwill, 2021, p. 310).\(^1\) The idea is that life “is as great a benefit as one can confer on creatures” (Zangwill, 2021, p. 310), and life, even if temporally limited, is what we grant those animals when we breed them only to be eaten. In other words, because there are animals that in some sense exist only because of the meat industry, and that existence has value in and of itself (under certain conditions to which I will respond below), we owe it to the animals to eat them.

I will now dissect Zangwill’s (2021) argument into its components. First, let’s have a look at the idea that a possible life (i.e., the life of an animal existing in the future) has actual moral valence. Zangwill (2021) might protest against me reading his argument as “appealing to . . . creatures who do not yet exist at that time” (p. 304), because his view apparently applies only to “existing animals . . . in virtue of a past and present mutually beneficial relationship between human beings and animals” (p. 304). But if that’s the case, there’s an easy objection: Even if, per “tradition,” as Zangwill repeatedly claims, we are obliged to eat existing animals now (a conclusion that I am going to challenge below), that doesn’t imply that we must therefore do the same to future animals. Tradition on its own doesn’t impose moral obligations. There’s an open-question type argument here asking, “Is the tradition really good?”

So, I take it, Zangwill’s (2021) view does tacitly rely on assumed future animal existence after all. Basing one’s arguments on hypothetical future existence—possible people, for example—is a common practice in moral philosophy (see Mulgan, 2006). For instance, when we consider the effects of climate change, moral philosophers urge us to anticipate the moral responsibility we have toward people living in the future. Because we have a certain responsibility to our great-grandchildren, the argument goes, we must act now to reduce carbon emissions and avoid climate catastrophe. That’s all fine as an argument. Zangwill’s point, however, is that we should breed and kill animals for the sake of gustatory satisfaction, for that maximizes existence—as in, there will be animals who wouldn’t otherwise, without incentive from the meat industry, exist—and maximizing existence (“net life”) is good.\(^2\)

The only caveat: Existence has to pass certain thresholds of what constitutes the good life, such as not being tortured; a standard of “goodness” the life of most farmed animals will not meet.\(^3\) Assuming some animal’s life passes the “goodness” test, if “net life” is to be maximized, then why kill animals at some arbitrary point in time? Since Zangwill (2021) concludes that we owe the animals their death, maximizing “net life” cannot be what motivates the argument. What else does?

Maybe Zangwill (2021) thinks that a life, whose sole purpose is death at some human’s hand, is a life worth living. It is precisely that life that ends in the slaughterhouse that, according to Zangwill’s utilitarian calculus, must be maximized. The author in fact makes the point that, contrary to Singer (1975), for instance, “the argument is not a consequentialist one. We have a duty to be the gentle custodians of happy animals that
we eat because of our ongoing beneficial relationship of mutual dependence” (Zangwill, 2021, p. 300). So, there’s an internal tension here: Is his argument consequentialist or not? Zangwill calls it a “historical benefit” view, judging from past rather than assumed future benefit. Unfortunately, the argument, even if formulated retrospectively, as it were, and the author’s claims to the opposite, is consequentialist. It presents itself in the form of “benign carnivorism,” as discussed and rejected by people like McMahan (2008).

The life of farmed animals then is not only worth living (even if unnecessarily limited in time) but also, according to Zangwill (2021), worth bringing about (an argument Zangwill builds on “tradition,” as debunked above). But is the life of a farmed animal—a life that is terminated at some others’ arbitrary will—really worth living? Even if it were, wouldn’t the life of farmed animals be manifoldly better without the doom of ultimate death at the hands of a human? We can, after all, decide if an animal who was (granting the validity of the first premise of Zangwill’s argument) in fact supposed to be slaughtered, whose existence is in some sense conditional on humans’ desire for meat, should be slaughtered. That’s a line of thought that goes orthogonal to the author’s (dubious) claim that “all currently existing domesticated animals have benefitted from the carnivorous practice” (Zangwill, 2021, p. 305). There is an is-ought gap here: Even though some animals do in some sense exist solely for the sake of meat consumption, it doesn’t follow that those animals should be slaughtered and their flesh consumed. We can imagine farmed animals to live a life not premised on untimely death, and that doesn’t constitute a harm done to the animal, does it? We don’t owe animals their death. Why would the author think otherwise?

Here’s one idea for how Zangwill (2021) might try to salvage his argument: It is one’s past intention to create life that makes it morally right to terminate that very life at one’s will. That’s hardly convincing. Consider this: Are parents morally permitted to slaughter their children? Their existence is premised on an intentional act of creation on the side of the parents, after all. What if someone “breeds” puppies to use them as firewood replacement? Imagine the puppies have a good life by the standards of what constitutes a good puppy life, but their existence’s sole purpose is to be pushed into the furnace at some arbitrarily chosen time. The fact that Zangwill has to resort to all sorts of caveats for why dogs, for instance, albeit in some sense bred solely for human purposes, should not be consumed highlights what’s flawed with Zangwill’s argument: Human intentionality influencing the process of creating life doesn’t warrant the moral permissibility of ending this life at humans’ will. As McMahan (2008) argued, once an animal exists, the reason why it exists is morally irrelevant.

Anticipating objections like “you wouldn’t do that to humans either,” Zangwill (2021) forestalls that there are no human beings who owe their existence to “cannibalistic meat-eating practices” (p. 304). And even if there were, they could survive without it, if liberated, which is radically unlike domesticated animals. But how does that imply that we are permitted—or even encouraged—to eat free-living animals otherwise unable to survive? Why not care for those animals, for that’s what we should be expected to do when humans are, for whatever reason—old age or disability—unable to survive in the natural
world? Zangwill’s (2021) sleight of hand is to say that “killing animals and eating them is not merely compatible with kindness and benefit to animals but is required if we are to be kind to animals and to benefit them” (p. 297). If I were Zangwill, I’d be suspicious of those types of arguments, for if we look at its history, we must notice that involuntary euthanasia has once been justified on the same grounds (see Glock, 1994). This is not a knockdown argument, of course, but one of guilt by association. I’ll say it yet again: One’s modus ponens is another’s modus tollens.

Having anticipated the rebuttal above, the author argues that humans and nonhuman animals have different moral worth, grounded in different claims to rights perhaps, so that even unconscious humans have moral value different (and greater than, Zangwill, 2021, says) to nonhuman animals. There’s too much going on here for me to unpack carefully enough. Suffice it to say, the line that animals don’t have rights is unconvincing. We can always, in the form of an open-question argument, ask the follow-up normative question “Should animals have rights?” We can imagine a world in which we no longer draw lines of rights (or the lack thereof) between races, genders, and, yes, species.

Equally unsatisfying is the author’s reference to Scruton (2000), who argued that “it is a relatively uncontroversial empirical premise that if the market for meat dried up, farmers would stop caring for animals and breeding them” (as cited in Zangwill, 2021, p. 296). While I grant Scruton the empirical premise, we can always, once again, ask the follow-up question “Should farmers stop caring for animals?” We can collectively decide to abandon meat-eating practices and care for the animals that have survived this vegetarian revolution. It’s not beyond the realms of feasibility. Zangwill (2021) would object to my airheaded utopianism, saying,

Of course, there are various barely possible utopian visions or fantasies in which large numbers of animals somehow get cared for without being killed and eaten. However, given the world as it is, the only way for animals to benefit in large numbers is to kill and eat them. Therefore, we should kill and eat them.” (p. 296)

Of course, such a utopia will seem impossible to someone who advocates for the killing of animals and thinks that the alternative to carnivorism is to “draw nutrition from the air” (Zangwill, 2021, p. 296). Not everyone, luckily, shares those limits to the imagination.

The most pressing counterargument to Zangwill (2021) probably is this: Imagine there’s an animal who exists only for the purpose of meat consumption. What if by mere chance this animal dies a natural death at old age? What if by mere chance it ends up not being eaten. In what sense has this animal been harmed? Do we really owe the animal the “pleasure” of untimely death? This is what Zangwill wants us to believe. He wants us to believe that vegetarians and vegans “do not care about the welfare of conscious animals because speciesism leads them not to value a tradition that benefits those animals, in particular, speciesism causes them to ignore animals’ pleasures and happiness” (Zangwill, 2021, p. 310). This is a slap in the face of animal welfare activists who have struggled to point out what should be uncontroversial: That animal life without the doom of premature slaughter is preferable to an existence where the sole purpose is supplying
meat. Sometimes, as a matter of intellectual responsibility, a modus ponens just shouldn’t be turned into a modus tollens.

Acknowledgment
I would like to thank Franziska Wolf for her helpful comments on an early version of this article and, even more importantly, for leading my way and always being by my side in the fight for animal welfare.

Notes
1. In fact, Zangwill (2021) claims to “agree with those, such as Peter Singer (1975). They think that animal consciousness means we ought not to eat animals, whereas I think the very opposite” (Zangwill, 2021, p. 296). Again, one’s modus ponens is another’s modus tollens.
2. Compare Zangwill’s (2021) “the existence of sheep is good—a good state of the world . . . existence good is a certain kind of intrinsic good” (p. 305).

References