

The Predation and Procreation Problems

Persistent Intuitions Gone Wild

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Predation causes a lot of suffering in the wild. Yet, a lot of people believe it is morally permissible. This article presents an ethical principle that justifies (condones) predation without referring to anthropocentric notions such as moral agency or species membership. The moral intuition that predation is permissible is coherent with other intuitions about harmful behaviors in the wild, such as the permissibility of some kinds of procreation (for example *r*-selection) that do not sufficiently contribute to well-being. These intuitions can be unified in an ethical principle that uses the three conditions of naturalness, normality and necessity. Furthermore, this 3-N-principle is related to the intrinsic value of biodiversity. Finally, some analogies between well-being of a sentient being and biodiversity of an ecosystem are discussed.

1. INTRODUCTION: INTUITIONS ABOUT PREDATION, MOTION AND PROCREATION

A lot of anti-speciesist animal rights activists and ethicists have the moral intuition that predation in the wild is permissible, in the sense that one does not have a duty to intervene and protect prey, and that we do not even have a reason to desire the prohibition of predation. It is not clear how this hands-off or *laissez-faire* approach of non-intervention is compatible with non-anthropocentric basic rights and the value of well-being.

Predators are not moral agents who can reason and understand the notions of rights and duties. Predators are amoral (Regan 1983). However, this cannot be a valid reason to allow predation: what if highly intelligent dolphins were a little bit more intelligent, such that their current proto-morality would become a fully-fledged morality? Even then my intuition says that those dolphins are allowed to kill many sentient fish for food. One

could simply refer to the species distinction and claim that any being who is not *homo sapiens* is allowed to hunt and can also be eaten. But a mere reference to a species is arbitrary.

We can make it even more personal with another example about bodily motion. What if scientists discover that insects are sentient beings? Should we be allowed to move around and kill many sentient insects even if by accident? My intuition says that we do not have a duty to stop moving. The speciesist *Homo sapiens* solution, Regan's "moral agents" solution as well as the related libertarian solution proposed by Ebert and Machan (2012), cannot explain this intuition: as moral agents (or as *homo sapiens*), we have a responsibility not to harm other sentient beings. Furthermore, if we died because we stopped moving, it is not obvious that new ecological disasters, such as overpopulation and mass starvation of insects, would occur. Hence, reference to possible ecological disasters and unforeseen side-effects (Singer 1973; Simmons 2009) is not sufficient either.

Perhaps our pro predation intuition is a moral illusion. However, this intuition is not only coherent with my pro motion intuition, but also with my pro procreation intuition: some kinds of procreation are harmful in the sense that the sentient beings who are born do not sufficiently contribute to (some measure of aggregated) well-being. The most extreme example of harmful procreation might be *r*-selection: an evolutionary reproductive strategy where animals have a very high reproduction rate but a very low individual survival rate (Horta 2010). Most of those animals have a very short life and an early death. If they develop sentience, they have very few opportunities for positive experiences. Perhaps they have lives not worth living at all.

2. NATURALNESS AND THE VALUE OF BIODIVERSITY

I have three coherent moral intuitions: predation, motion and procreation are each allowed. This coherence implies that it becomes less likely that the predation intuition is a moral illusion. But we can make the case stronger. In search for a "reflective equilibrium" (Rawls 1971), I propose an ethical principle that unifies the moral intuitions in those three different cases. This 3-N-principle is inspired by the three N's of justification in the ideology of carnism (Joy 2002): eating meat is natural, normal and necessary. This position has two problems: first, it does not recognize that meat is not necessary for humans to live a healthy life (ADA 2009). Second, it is not clear what "natural" means. Nevertheless, perhaps those elements of a speciesist carnist perspective can be used to make an antispeciesist ethic

of animal equality coherent with our predation, motion and procreation intuitions.

Let us define or interpret naturalness as a property of a type of behavior (such as predation or procreation): a behavior is natural if it originates from a blind process of natural evolution instead of being for example a conscious, reflective, non-instinctive invention. Such inventions are ‘artificial’ instead of “natural”. Furthermore, normality simply means that the behavior occurs a lot and necessity means that the behavior is required for the survival of individuals and populations. The 3-N-principle now says that:

If a behavior is both normal, natural and necessary, it is always allowed, even if it is harmful and violates rights and well-being. In other words, if (a) a sufficiently large group of sentient beings became by (b) an evolutionary process (c) dependent for their survival on harmful behavior, they are allowed to perform that behavior for survival.¹

Predation, motion and procreation are all natural behaviors (they originated by a blind evolutionary process), they happen a lot, and they are necessary for the survival of individuals and populations. Hence, these types of behavior are permissible. On the other hand, other harmful behaviors are not permissible, because at least one of the three N criteria are not met. Consumption of animal products by humans is harmful and not necessary, hence not allowed. Forced organ transplantation (sacrificing someone against his/her will and using his/her organs in order to save another patient) is harmful and not natural, hence not allowed². Road kill (killing sentient beings by cars) is morally wrong, because cars are not natural. And if a few animals develop (by evolution) a new type of behavior that is necessary for their survival but harms others, this new behavior may be necessary and natural, but it is not (yet) normal, and therefore not permissible.

The three N conditions come in degrees: one type of behavior can be more normal or more necessary than another. This implies that the more normal, necessary and natural a behavior is, the more it becomes permissible and the more it can trump the value of well-being.

¹ We are also allowed to intervene and protect ourselves, our loved ones and the prey if we are inclined to do so, and we do have a duty to intervene once feasible alternatives such as healthy vegan food for the predators or selective contraception for some animals are available.

² Both predation and forced organ transplantation are cases where someone is killed, his/her bodily tissue (meat, organs) are taken and put in someone else’s body (predator, patient) in order for the latter to survive. Yet, the naturalness criterion makes the distinction between these two cases.

We see that my predation, motion and procreation intuitions become even more coherent, because they fit with an ethical principle that refers to notions that many people care about: naturalness and necessity (survival). These notions even appear in a carnist ideology, but we can go one step further. Consider the no-harm principle. This principle corresponds to our moral intuitions, but moreover there exists a natural property called well-being. If we give intrinsic value to this natural property, then the intuitions behind the no-harm principle are coherent with this value of well-being.

Could we do the same for the 3-N-principle? Does there exist a natural property that we can value and that is coherent with the 3-N-principle? The answer is affirmative. I suggest that the 3-N-principle is connected to the moral value of biodiversity, at least if we define biodiversity as: “All variation in life forms, entities and processes that are the direct result of natural evolution, where natural evolution is generated by random genetic mutations”. This definition explicitly excludes intentional, intelligent interventions such as genetic modification. Our intelligence is a direct result of evolution, but the product of this intelligence, i.e. the intentional creation of new genes or life forms, does not contribute to biodiversity because biodiversity is only defined in terms of the *direct* results of a blind process of evolution, excluding indirect results. The importance of this exclusion of genetic modification will be discussed in a later section.

The 3-N-principle is connected to the value of biodiversity as follows (for a deeper discussion, see Bruers 2014). If a behavior is natural, it contributes to biodiversity by definition. If it is natural and normal, it contributes a lot to biodiversity, and if a behavior is natural, normal and necessary, biodiversity would drastically decrease if that behavior was prohibited and so no longer existed. Such a large decrease in biodiversity could be considered worse than violations of rights and well-being involved in the harmful behavior.

Of course, if we were to intervene in a single instance of predation, stopping an individual predator, biodiversity would not be in danger. Yet, we would not have a duty to intervene in such a singular occurrence. Therefore, the connection between the 3-N-principle and biodiversity only works if we specify the notion of a duty. When we say we have a duty to prevent this predator from hunting prey in this specific situation, what we imply is that we should be willing to accept a universal prevention of predation (anywhere, at all times, in all similar situations). A prohibition means a universal prohibition, not only for this single predator, but for all predators. Consequently, a lot of biodiversity would be lost. That is why there is no duty to stop the single predator.

Predation, motion and procreation are allowed because a universal prohibition of those types of behavior would result in a severe decrease in

biodiversity, but what kind of value does biodiversity have and how valuable is it? Biodiversity has instrumental value, in the sense that it can contribute to (aggregated) well-being. Yet, if scientists discover that intervening in nature and decreasing biodiversity would be better for well-being, my intuition still says that predation, motion and procreation are permissible. Therefore, I suggest biodiversity has an intrinsic (non-instrumental, non-empirical) value, which means that it is independent on contingent empirical scientific discoveries.

Biodiversity does not always trump well-being. The value of an amount of biodiversity should be weighed against the value of an amount of (aggregated) well-being. If moral agents are the source of intrinsic value, then it is up to us, as moral agents, to decide which one of those values is the strongest. It will be an intuitive judgment requiring balancing; moral agents can democratically arrive at mutual agreement on the strengths of those values³.

3. AN ANALOGY BETWEEN BIODIVERSITY AND WELL-BEING

We can draw some analogies between well-being and biodiversity, not to justify the intrinsic value of biodiversity, but to make it a bit more coherent and a more plausible.

1. Sentient beings have a tendency to increase their well-being, because these beings have multiple needs, and they are looking for strategies to satisfy their needs as much as possible (trade-offs, resource scarcity and incompatible strategies limit their growth in well-being, though). Analogously, ecosystems have a tendency to increase their biodiversity, because these ecosystems consist of procreating living beings, and they are subject to genetic variation (natural selection due to resource scarcity limits the growth of biodiversity, however).
2. Consciousness underlies well-being, just as naturalness underlies biodiversity. However, only positive conscious experiences contribute to

³ As well-being is not objectively interpersonally comparable (my qualia of happiness are measured in different units to your qualia of happiness, similar to the way that seeing red may be different for different persons), and as there is no objective way to aggregate well-being (should we take the sum, the average or a weighted average?), intuitive balancing is unavoidable even in a consequentialist welfare ethic. Moral agents might still come to a democratic agreement on how to measure, value and balance everyone's well-being. The same goes for the inclusion of a new intrinsic value, such as biodiversity, that is not objectively comparable to well-being.

well-being, just as necessary natural behaviors are important for biodiversity. Normal necessary natural behaviors correspond with intense positive conscious experiences.

3. Both well-being and biodiversity are a collection (variation) of different things that we can value: pleasure, friendship and reading a good book all contribute to well-being, just like genes, taxonomies (species) and biotic communities contribute to biodiversity. Both well-being and biodiversity are natural properties that are difficult to express in one number, but we are able to see large increases and decreases.
4. Well-being is the result of preference satisfaction, just as biodiversity is the result of evolution. Defining well-being as the variation of all positive feelings that are the result of preference (need) satisfaction combines mental state accounts with preference satisfaction accounts of well-being (see Shaw 1999, chap. 2). Analogously, biodiversity is defined as all variation in life forms that are the result of natural evolution.
5. Plugging someone in a hypothetical “experience machine” (Nozick 1974) that generates feelings of pleasure in a virtual reality does not necessarily increase well-being, because well-being is not only composed of positive feelings, but those feelings need to be the result of preference satisfaction. An experience machine does not satisfy the needs for e.g. authenticity and activity. Similarly, one does not necessarily increase biodiversity by introducing new genes and genetically modified organisms, because those new life forms are not the result of evolution. Genetically modified species are intentionally created by intelligent beings and are not the product of a blind process of genetic mutation. The only possible strategy to increase someone’s well-being, is by eliminating obstacles that prevent preference satisfaction (i.e. eliminating barriers that enforce trade-offs or eliminating scarcities). Similarly, the only possible strategy to increase biodiversity is by eliminating ecosystem pressures that increase competition over scarce resources.

All in all, well-being is for a sentient being what biodiversity is for a natural ecosystem. We should not lower well-being without good reason, and we also should not lower biodiversity without good reason. The only important disanalogy is that well-being is valued by the sentient being, whereas biodiversity is not valued by the ecosystem.

It might be that the intuition about the permissibility of predation is a moral illusion. Nevertheless, its coherence with other intuitions about other kinds of harmful behavior, its unification in a 3-N-principle, its relation with the value of biodiversity and the analogy between well-being and biodiversity are not likely to be ad hoc rationalizations to solve the predation

problem. If it was, it would be a very sophisticated rationalization. If moral agents democratically decide that a value of biodiversity is implausible, we should intervene in the wild.

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