

Making a Difference on Behalf of Animals Living in the Wild

Interview with Jeff McMahan

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JEFF MCMAHAN currently holds the prestigious White's Chair of Moral Philosophy at Oxford University. He has previously been a professor of philosophy at Rutgers University (USA). He has written extensively about theoretical and applied ethics, two of his most notable contributions being *The Ethics of Killing: Problems at the Margins of Life* and *Killing in War*. Professor McMahan is also known for his work in animal ethics, being one of the first major philosophers to seriously address the situation of animals in nature. In his *New York Times* article *The Meat Eaters* he defends the view that if the suffering of nonhuman animals is morally relevant, then we should also be concerned with the suffering of animals living in the wild. In this way, he concludes that we should intervene for their benefit whenever it is in our power to do so.

CF: A number of ethicists (as well as political philosophers) work in their discipline out of a theoretical interest, because they find the problems of practical philosophy thrilling. However, you belong to another group of theorists who work with the aim of making the world a better place. In which ways do you think academic work can benefit nonhuman animals?

JM: Well, the primary purpose of the kind of philosophy that I do is to understand morality better. But I think that is an essential precondition of trying to make the world better – to make sure you do it the right way, make sure that you are not making a mistake, as a lot of people do. I think that philosophy has already benefited animals very considerably just by bringing the arguments into popular discussion and making people more aware of the challenges. And I think that will continue. That as more argument is done, more considerations are discussed, the deeper people go into the arguments, I think what we are going to find is that the arguments for

vegetarianism are conclusive. And, eventually, the public discussions that have been prompted in large measure by philosophy are going to succeed and turn more and more people away from eating meat and harming animals in unjustifiable ways.

CF: In your work you have addressed several issues that had been neglected in moral philosophy. What has led you to work on the issue of wild animal suffering?

JM: Well, if you want to know the real answer to that question, it was discussions with Oscar Horta. Oscar raised the issue with me, we discussed it some. It seemed to me to be a really important issue and I had an opportunity to write a piece on some issue having to do with animals for a blog that was being run by some people in “the research triangle” in North Carolina. And so, prompted and inspired by the discussions with Oscar, I tried to think as carefully as I could about this issue of wild animal suffering for this blog. And as it turned out, the blog piece I wrote for the website at “the research triangle” in North Carolina was also picked up by *The New York Times*, which got it more circulation. But that is really the explanation.

CF: In your *New York Times* paper *The Meat Eaters* you pointed out the need to take seriously not only the harm suffered by animals eaten by human beings, but also the harm suffered due to natural causes by animals living in the wild. Can you briefly explain your argument there?

JM: Really, it just seems to me very obvious that if we have moral reasons not to cause suffering to animals through our practices ... Which is the basis of one of the arguments against meat-eating, particularly in cultures in which most of the meat that people eat comes from factory farms – namely, that the rearing of animals in conditions that are optimally economic from the point of view of the producers, the producers cause enormous suffering to the animals. And I think increasingly people recognize that factory farming is a highly morally problematic practice. Even most meat-eaters, if forced to confront the conditions in which the animals they eat are raised, will acknowledge that the suffering that those animals experience is of moral concern. Even if they continue to eat them. So, it is pretty widely accepted, then, that animal suffering matters, and that we have a reason not to cause it. But, if animal suffering matters and that is the basis of our reason not to cause animal suffering, then it seems that animal suffering that is caused not by us but by other conditions is also bad and there must, therefore, also be a reason why it should be prevented if at all possible. It just seems to me a quite clear inference.

CF: While in your work on wild animal suffering you have focused on the question of predation, these animals suffer also from many other causes, such as disease, starvation, weather conditions, parasitism, etc. The idea that we should help animals suffering from these causes may be more acceptable to the public. Do you think this could be a reason to tackle them instead of the harder question of predation, or do you think that it is the task of philosophers to address less popular problems as well?

JM: I think to the extent that it would be more feasible to prevent large amounts of animal suffering through addressing problems such as disease and starvation, there would be fewer objections from people to that kind of intervention in the natural world. Though some people would think that even those kinds of interventions would be wrong because they would be intervening in what they think of as natural cycles that we have no business intervening in. That seems to me to be a mistaken view if, on balance, an intervention would work to the benefit of the sentient beings in that particular area. So, yes, maybe it is a strategic or tactical mistake to focus on predation rather than disease, hunger – other causes of suffering for animals in the wild.

CF: Since the question of animal ethics started to be studied by moral philosophers and other academics in the 70s, the interest in this topic has grown and an increasing number of theorists have been working on this. However, this issue is still not taken seriously by most philosophers. In what way do you think this situation could change, and what could we do to bring about this change?

JM: I do not know of anything that can be done, really, except go on the way we are going now. I do think that, as more and more philosophers become aware of the powerful arguments for vegetarianism and as more and more philosophers become openly vegetarian, this will exert additional pressure on others to join and become vegetarians themselves. And it may well be the case that, before too terribly long, a majority of philosophers will be vegetarians, and that could be a very powerful statement, socially and politically. Or it might not be, it depends on whether people have much respect for the views of philosophers – which in a country like the United States is not much. That is, in the United States most philosophers, by far the vast majority of philosophers are atheists, but I think religious believers are not bothered by that fact at all. They just think philosophers do not have any common sense and do not have any particular wisdom. They are weird people who deal with esoteric and arcane problems and do not have any real sense of reality, and that kind of thing. Also true in politics – an overwhelming majority of philosophers in the United States are

very left-wing. That does not seem to trouble conservatives much, either. So maybe if most philosophers were vegetarians, it would not say much to many people, though. But I think it does help when philosophers teach classes on practical ethics in which they discuss the moral status of animals, which has been increasingly the case over the past few decades. Courses on the human treatment of animals are taught in all the major universities now and people are forced to think about this. And they are forced to think about this by philosophers, and that can only be good.

CF: What would you recommend to people trying to build their career in the academic world who want to make a difference in favor of animals living in the wild?

JM: Well, the obvious thing to say is: think about the problem, write PhD dissertations on it, publish articles on this issue. This is a very under-discussed issue in philosophy as elsewhere. And I suppose that is one of the problems. The problem of the suffering of animals in the wild is one that has received just almost no discussion from anybody, and that makes it easier for people to ignore it. To the extent that it becomes a controversial issue, that in itself forces people to think about it and take it seriously. And it can eventually become a real issue in public discussion that people can not just laugh off and say, you know: “nobody could possibly think that this is a problem”; “this is silly, this is trivial”; “we need to deal with problems about human beings first” ... And so on and so far.