

Responses

Still more on animal rights

David S. Oderberg has not, in his 'Response' (April 1990) to my 'Response' (January 1990) to his original article of May 1989, produced any positive argument for animal rights, but instead seems to rely on the assertion that, if we do not concede animal rights, then there is no serious moral fault involved in the ill-treatment of animals, and, since this is evidently false, animals must have rights. But it could surely be maintained by those who consider that the human 'stewardship of nature' precludes animal rights in any strict sense, that the same stewardship imposes very serious moral responsibilities in justice as well as temperance. If I own a large number of diamonds, which I destroy just to show how rich I am, I have acted contrary to the obligations which ownership of property imposes.

The United Nations' Declaration of Human Rights bases the claim to human rights on human possession of conscience and reason. If we wish to claim animals rights of a similar order then we would have to abandon the criteria of conscience and reason, and it would seem to be difficult to find satisfactory alternative criteria. It has been suggested that some Asian systems of values situate human rights in a wider attitude of respect for the cosmos, but this attitude seems to arise from an interplay of animist personification of natural forces and the Buddhist distrust of the self. About ten years ago, it was reported in the *Royal Anthropological Institute Newsletter* that Japanese scientists arranged ceremonies for the benefit of the souls of monkeys killed in medical experiments, but this does not seem to have led them to abandon such experimental killings.

Incidentally, David S. Oderberg seems also to believe that the 'deposit of doctrine' can be changed when the Church authorities feel like it. In fact, the accusation of wishing to revise the deposit of faith is one of the most serious accusations that can be made against a Catholic theologian!

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The positive argument for animal rights (if this is not yet clear from what I have already written) is, briefly, that a proper understanding of the natural law requires their attribution. If it is clear (or even reasonable to assume) that the flourishing of a particular animal according to its nature involves its doing certain things, then it has a right not to be impeded in such behaviour. Chimpanzees form closely-knit extended family groups—it is in their nature to do so and is necessary for their well-being as chimpanzees. Therefore, they have a right to maintain such groupings, and poachers are duty-bound not to steal the offspring from grieving mothers to sell them to European animal laboratories. And raising chimps in solitary confinement for the purposes of research also violates their natural rights. This is a matter of justice *precisely* because it is a matter of rights. The diamond example is irrelevant because it reflects no manifest injustice.

Conscience and reason are not necessary for the attribution of rights, and I would advise against citing U.N. documents as support, being as they are the flawed ideological products of secular-humanistic moral thinking. (The Declaration on the Rights of the Child, signed recently by the Vatican, defines children as those individuals *already born* and provided with a *civil identity*. Delightful.) I have a right to clean air and unadulterated food, but I use neither conscience nor reason in exercising these rights: I *have* to eat and I *have* to breathe in order to survive and flourish as a human being. The criteria for animals intersect with those for humans, the overlap being located in the terrain of characteristics common to both. (The capacity to elect governments, and hence the right to vote, are obviously outside the overlap; the right not be deprived of one's natural habitat, or the simple right to life, fall within the overlap.) Again, the cosmos has nothing to do with it either.

I must clarify my position in respect of Fr. Edwards' final charge. I have never said the deposit of doctrine can or should be changed. I said (April 1990, p. 202) that it could be added to. To remove all ambiguity, I will rephrase my claim without using the inappropriate term 'deposit'. The claim is *not* that the principles of natural law, which the Church has always known, can be changed—they are immutable. Rather, the *corpus* of particular Church teachings, derived by inference from those principles, can be added to by making explicit those teachings which are at present taught only implicitly by the Church, and if there is no explicit teaching on animal rights and the practical consequences of recognising them, *should* be added to by the further or more perspicacious application of those unchangeable principles.

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Editor : This correspondence is now closed.