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NO HEAVY PETTING

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THE LATEST ANIMAL RIGHTS CONTROVERSY IS NOT ABOUT ANIMAL EXPERIMENTATION, FUR COATS, OR THE SLAUGHTER OF FARM ANIMALS IN EUROPE TO PREVENT THE SPREAD OF FOOT-AND-MOUTH DISEASE. IT'S ABOUT THE MORALITY OF SEX BETWEEN PEOPLE AND ANIMALS.

Admittedly, bestiality is hardly a burning issue. But it's being discussed in editorials in the Wall Street Journal, The Weekly Standard and The New Republic, thanks to an essay by controversial philosopher Peter Singer in the online magazine Nerve, titled "Heavy Petting."

Singer, author of the 1979 book "Animal Liberation," argues that our revulsion at human-animal coupling is as irrational as the old prohibitions on homosexuality and that the persistence of this taboo attests to "our desire to differentiate ourselves . . . from animals.

Singer scoffs at the belief that humans have a unique spiritual nature or moral stature. To him, "we are animals," which means that interspecies sex "ceases to be an offense to our status and dignity as human beings" and is not wrong unless it involves violence to the animal.

Singer's essay has been roundly denounced. Interestingly, however, many of his critics suggest that what makes sexual activity with animals immoral is not that it degrades humans but that it exploits animals: Since animals cannot give meaningful consent to sex, bestiality is akin to pedophilia.

Such an argument, however persuasive, raises inevitable questions about other human uses of animals (isn't being butchered worse than being sexually abused?)

It also poses problems for animal rights advocates: If animals can have sex with each other but not with people, that means drawing a clear line between humanity and other species and denying the moral autonomy of animals.

Surprisingly few commentators have challenged Singer's dubious basic premise: that human beings have no special status or worth and that "speciesism" is a prejudice not much different from racism. This premise is shared by the animal rights movement, even if Singer's endorsement of bestiality generally is not. But the notion of moral equality between humans

and animals is pernicious even if it's not extended to the bedroom.

As philosopher Tibor Machan argues in a 1991 essay on animal rights, human beings have rights because they are "moral agents," capable of distinguishing and choosing between right and wrong. There is, writes Machan, "no valid intellectual place for rights in the nonhuman world . . . in which moral responsibility is for all practical purposes absent."

Yes, some animals can exhibit caring behaviors, such as helping an injured fellow beast, that animal rights activists invoke as evidence of morality; but no one really expects animals to respect the rights of other living things.

I'd like to see Singer try to persuade wolves not to mistreat sheep. Gary Francione, an animal-rights legal theorist, does feed his dogs a vegan diet, free of all animal products; but it's rather ironic that a champion of animal rights would use his human power to coerce animals into something so unnatural.

Indeed, Machan points out, most animal rights advocates "never urge animals to behave morally" or propose that animals be held responsible for moral wrongs. This is evident in Singer's discussion of an incident in which a woman visiting an orang-utan rehabilitation camp was forcibly grabbed by an aroused male ape, and the female primatologist who ran the camp told her not to worry since it wouldn't hurt her. (The animal lost interest before anything serious happened.)

Singer is impressed by the primatologist's lack of shock or horror at an orang-utan's sexual attraction to a human. Yet surely, if someone reacted so casually to an attempted rape by a human male, we would be appalled.

This is not to say that animal welfare shouldn't be included in our sphere of moral concern. Most people believe that we should refrain from inflicting unnecessary pain on sentient beings. But any argument for the benign treatment of animals must be based not so much on animal rights as on the human values of compassion and respect for life.

Blurring human-animal boundaries, ostensibly meant to elevate animals, can only end up eroding the importance we place on the human capacity for moral action. And that has troubling implications not only for human rights but for the laudable cause of preventing cruelty to animals.

If humans have no special moral status, it's hard to argue that they have special moral obligations - toward fellow humans or toward other creatures.

Memo:

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