

## REVIEW OF *THE MORAL STATUS OF ANIMALS*

Stephen Clark's *The Moral Status of Animals* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977) not only presents a sophisticated and scholarly defense of vegetarianism and antivivisectionism; it presents a fresh view of people's relation to nature. It should be read, I believe, by all scholars interested in animal welfare and environmental issues. Clark's scholarship is deep and wide; his arguments complex and rich. As a result, there is much to learn from the book, even though one may profoundly disagree with the author's conclusions.

Before I review Clark's arguments I will mention two aspects of the book that may prevent it from having the wide appeal and the practical impact Clark desires (p. 186).

First, the book is too scholarly and sophisticated. With its numerous classical and contemporary philosophical and literary references, the book may impress scholars, but it will hardly convert meat eaters to vegetarianism. Furthermore, publishing the book with the Clarendon Press seems unwise for someone with practical, in contrast to scholarly, ambitions. It is likely that Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation*, published by New York Times Books, will have a greater practical impact than Clark's book.

Second, despite the scholarly approach and prestigious publisher, Clark is sometimes intemperate and angry. As a result, he resorts to name calling and the too hasty dismissal of counterarguments. Such an attitude is hardly designed to win friends. Indeed, at least one philosopher and well-known advocate of vegetarianism and animal rights has maintained that, because of Clark's attitude, his book may do the animal rights movement positive harm. (Tom Regan, "Review of Stephen R. L. Clark's *The Moral Status of Animals*," *Philosophical Books*, forthcoming).

Practical considerations aside, what arguments does Clark muster to support his case? It is impossible here to review all the arguments found in his book, but I will consider some of the major ones.

Vivisectionists and meat eaters attempt to justify their practices by pointing to alleged differences between humans and other animals. For example, it is noted that humans can use language and can reason, while nonhuman animals can do neither. Clark in many parts of his book attempts to break down these alleged differences and to make us see the close similarities between the human species and other species.

Clark employs several different considerations in this context. He suggests, first, that even if animals do not have an assertive language, they have a demonstrative language just as humans do. For example, humans and

animals show, but do not assert, that they are in pain by their pain behavior. Furthermore, Clark maintains that animals may well have an assertive language; we simply do not know what it is.

But even if animals do not have a language, they can still be considered rational. Animals, according to Clark, behave in ways that can justifiably be called rational: they investigate, recognize their errors, look questioningly, and so on. Moreover, even if animals are not rational, they still suffer, and we should be compassionate toward them because they suffer, not because they are rational.

Do animals have moral rights? As far as I can determine, the question of the rights of animals is not particularly important to Clark. Indeed, he admits that it may be inappropriate to speak of rights in the context of animals. The crucial point, for Clark, is that it is wrong to treat animals badly. Whether one speaks of animals as having rights is irrelevant. As Clark puts it, "Let us say that such creatures have no rights and wait upon our mercy: shall we not give it to them?" (p. 17).

Clark admits that animals have no positive rights in that they have no positive claims on us; we are not required to go out of our way to supply them with the necessities of life (p. 28). But Clark argues that, just because they have no claims on us, it does not follow that we (humans) have a right to harm them. Although Clark speaks at times of animals having negative rights, for example, the right not to be harmed, it is not essential for his purposes to believe that they do. He could and often does make his point without any talk of rights (negative or positive)—namely, it is wrong to harm animals.

Clark correctly, I think, dismisses the idea that animals do not suffer. All the behavioral and physiological evidence indicates that they do. Even if animals do not suffer as much as humans (which is debatable), there is no doubt that they do suffer to some extent. Consequently, they should not be made to suffer unnecessarily.

But could not a critic say something like this? "Admittedly, animals suffer to some extent. But why does it follow that they should not be caused to suffer? Suppose I enjoy seeing animals suffer?"

I do not believe Clark answers this question explicitly. But one answer—a kind of dialectical answer—seems to be in the spirit of Clark's general position. One should point out to the critic that he or she believes that causing unnecessary suffering to human beings is wrong. Then one could argue that, unless some morally relevant difference can be found between human and nonhuman animals, the critic is inconsistent to admit that causing unnecessary suffering to humans is wrong and to deny that causing unnecessary suffering to animals is wrong.

The critic may have some replies here. For example, he may attempt to find some relevant moral difference between humans in general and animals. I am, however, very skeptical that this can be done. Another tack would be to

allow that causing unnecessary suffering to some small subclass of humans is morally permissible. Then the critic might argue that members of this small subclass share a property that is morally relevant and is not shared by humans outside of the class and that justifies causing them unnecessary suffering. Finally, the critic might argue that this property is also shared by nonhuman animals.

The trouble with this defense is that it is difficult to see what subclass of human beings the critic could have in mind or what relevant moral property would be referred to. Even people who have seriously suggesting killing extremely retarded people or hopelessly sick people have never suggested causing such people unnecessary suffering.

Let us suppose that the critic's counterargument is unsuccessful and that it is morally wrong to cause unnecessary suffering to animals. What, practically, is supposed to follow from this? According to Clark: a firm commitment to vegetarianism. As I have argued, however, in an earlier issue of this journal ("A Critique of Moral Vegetarianism," *Reason Papers*, no. 3 [1975]), although this is a common conclusion of vegetarians, it does not follow unless certain debatable premises are assumed. One basic idea behind this argument may be that if one stops eating meat this will have the effect on the meat-packing industry of reducing the suffering of animals raised and killed for food, but a single individual's commitment to vegetarianism will have no impact on the meat-packing industry. Vegetarianism would have to be a large movement, indeed, to have an appreciable effect. And even if it were large, it is doubtful that it would affect the production of meat in the long run. If past experience is any guide, industries often find new markets for a product when demand for it decreases.

Another idea that may be behind the argument is that, although being a vegetarian may not have any practical effect on meat packing directly, it is a symbolic act, a way of protesting the meat-packing industry's cruel treatment of animals. The question whether there is any obligation to protest in *this* way arises, however. Other forms of protest are possible and may be more effective.

Furthermore, a meat eater sensitive to animal suffering could only eat the meat of animals killed painlessly and raised without the suffering usually associated with factory farms. Clark would nevertheless object. Clearly, he could not object on the grounds that the animals should not be caused needless pain. On what grounds, then?

Certainly, one argument Clark gives seems debatable. He argues that if we kill animals, this will weaken our respect for human life (p. 75). That this is true is surely not obvious; it needs factual evidence that Clark does not supply. There is another way of interpreting Clark's position, though. Instead of saying that killing animals will in fact weaken respect for human life, one might maintain that, if one believes that it is morally permissible to kill animals painlessly, then in all consistency one would have to believe that