

Review of Tatjana Višak, *Killing Happy Animals: Explorations in Utilitarian Ethics* **Palgrave MacMillan, Houndsmills, England, 2013, 188 + pp**

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I agreed to review this book based on the title alone (coupled with a cover picture of a adult pig and several piglets outdoors in the grass). My decision was justified, since it offers a coherent, detailed response to an important problem in animal ethics and animal welfare: the question of humane (or “animal friendly”) animal husbandry, especially in the meat industry, in which animals are raised with the end of being killed long before the end of their natural lifespan.

Humane animal husbandry is based on two distinct assumptions. The first is that animals’ welfare matters, so that they should have pleasant lives and avoid unnecessary suffering. The second is that killing animals for food is morally justified. This is commonly justified, in both popular and philosophical discourse, with the claim that “the animals are granted pleasant lives, usually in connection with the claim that they would not exist at all if it were not for the purpose of our consumption. By consuming and farming animals, we are actually enabling their existence and granting them a pleasant life, which seems better than not existing at all” (1). Henry Salt, an early twentieth century animal welfare advocate, called this “the logic of the larder,” according to which keeping and killing animals for consumption actually benefits them, because they wouldn’t exist at all apart otherwise (49). Their short but pleasant lives justify their deaths. (Deaths are presumed to involve no physical or emotional suffering for the animal killed or others, a claim that Višak notes is problematic, but she accepts it as the presupposition for the argument at hand.)

The philosophical justification for this is a particular type of Utilitarianism, Total View, which judges the morality of different actions based on their contribution to aggregate welfare (and not the welfare of any particular individual). Total View Utilitarianism accepts the Replaceability Argument, according to which the loss of future welfare that is caused by killing an animal “can be compensated by bringing a new animal into existence that would not otherwise have existed and whose life

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contains at least as much welfare as the future of the killed being would have contained” (14). Because total (aggregate) welfare remains the same, the death is not morally problematic. Each sentient being’s life is worth the same as another’s, according to the principle of impartiality that is fundamental to Utilitarianism. Thus a moral zero-sum equation takes place when a new pig takes the place of one who was killed for meat.

Central to Višak’s argument is the fact that not all forms of Utilitarianism allow for the Replaceability Argument. In contrast to Total View Utilitarianism, she explains, the Prior Existence View holds that the welfare of a contingent being cannot be taken into account in moral equations aimed at justifying particular actions. A contingent being is one who would not have been created unless another was first killed. The Replaceability Argument makes sense only if the welfare of contingent beings matters just as much as the welfare of actually existing beings. Philosophical justifications of animal-friendly meat production rely heavily on an explicit, or sometimes implicit, acceptance of the Replaceability Argument and its underlying assumption that contingent beings can and should be part of our moral calculus.

Višak argues, however, that a more persuasive argument can be built with the help of the Prior Existence View, which says that only the welfare of actually existing beings can be taken into account in determining the moral justification of a particular action (or institution). Thus the welfare of contingent beings cannot be used to counterbalance the welfare loss that occurs when a sentient animal is killed. This argument in turn requires the claim that “existence cannot make a being better or worse off than non-existence” (80). In other words, a rancher does not make a pig better off by creating her simply to replace a pig that he killed for meat. The welfare of the actually existing pig—the one who was killed—matters in a way that the welfare of the contingent pig—who was created to replace the first one—does not. This leads to the ultimate conclusion that animal friendly meat production cannot be morally justified, at least not on the basis of the “logic of the larder.” The welfare lost with the death of an animal who would otherwise have continued a relatively pleasant existence cannot be counter-balanced by the creation of a new one to take her place.

The book concludes that “the utilitarian concern with animals is not restricted to the avoidance of suffering.” Instead, “Utilitarianism has the resources to oppose the routine killing of animals,” both in meat production and in other practices, including sports hunting and fishing (145). Utilitarians who accept that death is a harm, because it entails a loss of future welfare, do not have to accept that this loss can be compensated by the creation of new “happy animals.” They can, rather, look to the claim of Prior Existence Utilitarianism that “outcomes should be evaluated in terms of harms and benefits for sentient beings” (141), not in terms of the aggregate quantity of welfare.

The book is carefully argued, well-organized, and clearly written, although it is somewhat repetitive. It lays out an important argument within Utilitarian philosophy, and it points to important arguments well beyond the confines of this framework. Unfortunately, Višak does not venture beyond a narrowly-defined discussion that is largely internal to Utilitarianism. Her primary goal is to demonstrate that Utilitarians need not accept the routine killing even of happy animals. This goal is admirable and

she achieves it well. However, this would have been a more interesting and important book had she expanded her scope. She might have engaged broader discussions not only in animal ethics and welfare but also in environmental and agrarian thought by presenting her case not only as an alternative position within Utilitarianism but as a response to defenses of “animal friendly” meat production.

Such defenses are common in the large literature on local food and sustainable economies, agrarianism, and related fields. They are usually made by people who do not argue in explicitly Utilitarian terms, even though their presuppositions and claims are implicitly Utilitarian. Višak would have written a more provocative book had she made this point strongly, noting that these crypto-Utilitarian arguments can be answered in their own terms. While it is disappointing that the book did not fulfill this larger potential, it is still useful and worth reading. It provides, further, a valuable resource for people who want to respond in philosophically rigorous ways to the “Logic of the Larder” that is widespread in contemporary agricultural and environmental thought.