

BUDDHIST REFLECTIONS AT SEA LEVEL: A RESPONSE TO GOLDBERG'S "I WANT MY BEEF"

Mylan Engel, Jr.
Northern Illinois University
mylan-engel@niu.edu

David Goldberg's beef isn't just about beef. His goal is to justify the raising, killing, and eating of cows, steers (castrated bulls), and the myriad of other animals we routinely kill for food. While he promises to give us three arguments in defense of meat-eating, I detect five arguments: (i) the monk aping argument (If monks do it, so can I), (ii) the selfish gene argument, (iii) the animals can't suffer argument, (iv) the high elevation argument, and (v) the prey-liberation *reductio*. The arguments are independent of each other and will be treated as such. In what follows, I will address arguments (i) – (iv), starting with (ii). [I won't address argument (v) *per se*, because Singer has already addressed it in Chapter 6 of *Animal Liberation*.] Along the way, I will argue that Goldberg misinterprets Dawkins, Singer, and Norcross, and that for this reason, along with countless others, his defense of eating meat fails.

1. The Selfish Gene Argument

Goldberg contends that Peter Singer's call for a nonspeciesistic ethic flies in the face of the biological reality of gene selfishness. In *The Selfish Gene*, Richard Dawkins argues that traditional evolutionists are mistaken in thinking that *species* is the primary unit of selection in natural selection. He contends that the fundamental unit of selection is the *gene*. A successful gene will be long-lived (in the gene pool), fecund, and have a high degree of copying-fidelity. An unsuccessful gene will promptly be removed from the gene pool. But how exactly do selfish genes succeed? Here is the gist of selfish gene theory: An individual gene is like a tiny self-replicating computer program that builds/designs certain features into a resulting organism. As such, genes give rise to the phenotypic traits of the individual macro-organisms they, in concert with other genes, design. Those phenotypic traits that help an individual organism survive and procreate in a given environment are fitness enhancing (in that environment) and, as a result, are likely to be passed on to the next generation, and hence, the *genes* responsible for those phenotypic traits are selected for. Genes that result in maladaptive phenotypic traits are likely to result in organisms that die before procreating. Waxing Quinean, we might put the point as follows: Those genes that give rise to organisms ill-suited to their environment have the pathetic but praiseworthy tendency to remove

themselves from the gene pool.¹ The basic idea is that genes are selfish. They only survive by producing organisms well-suited to their environments.

Of course, it's a far leap to go from the view that genes are fundamentally selfish to the view that the individual organisms they produce are selfish. After all, in certain environments unselfish, altruistic, cooperating organisms will have a better chance of surviving than selfish, uncooperative organisms, and in those environments, altruistic cooperation will be selected for, and this cooperation may be intraspecies or interspecies. Examples include kin selection, tit-for-tat cooperative strategies, and symbiotic relationships.

It's an even farther leap to go, as Goldberg does, from the view that genes are selfish [i.e. "replicator-centric"] to the view that the organisms they produce must, in turn, be species-centric. Not only is there counterevidence [Countless symbiotic species demonstrate the survival value of transspecies altruism and cooperation in certain environments], but more importantly, such a claim runs counter to selfish gene theory itself, which explicitly denies that species is the unit of selection. According to selfish gene theory, selection at the level of species is no more plausible than selection at the level of genera, orders, classes, or phyla. (Dawkins 1976, 11)

And it's a leap to certain death to assume that the selfishness of our genes biologically necessitates a speciescentric ethic. Goldberg takes this latter leap as well, for he writes: "As a behavior pattern that was selected for, a selection that rests precisely on a *replicator-centricity*, which secondarily leads to a *species-centric* position, evolutionary moral behavior flies in the face of Singer's desire to have a non-species-centric position" (p. 6)

There are two reasons that the latter leap is a leap to certain death: First, it commits the naturalistic fallacy of inferring an 'ought' from an 'is'. Dawkins himself begins his book with a caveat about drawing moral conclusions from the factual claims contained in his book:

This brings me to the first point I want to make about what this book is *not*. I am not advocating a morality based on evolution. I am saying how things have evolved. I am not saying how we humans morally ought to behave. I stress this, because I know I am in danger of being

misunderstood by those people, all too numerous, who cannot distinguish a statement of belief in what is the case from an advocacy of what ought to be the case. (Dawkins 1976, 3)

Second, in point of fact, human beings have evolved in such a way that we do care about the welfare of members of other species, and if selfish gene theory is correct, then the gene responsible for our empathetic concern for other species must either have survival value itself or must be inextricably tied to another trait that does have survival value. Otherwise, the *caring-for-other-species gene* would have been eliminated from the gene pool. Consequently, if biology were the sole determinant of our moral attitudes, moral concern for members of other species would necessarily be reflected in those attitudes.

2. The Animals Can't Suffer Argument

Utilitarians, like Peter Singer and Alastair Norcross, maintain that an action X is right for an agent S iff, out of all the actions available to S, X maximizes pleasure and minimizes pain (and suffering) *for all those affected by the action*. In making our utilitarian calculations, utilitarianism requires that we take into account the suffering of any being capable of suffering. After all, any being capable of suffering has an interest in avoiding such suffering. Singer and Norcross both maintain that modern animal agriculture--with its attendant unanaesthetized branding, dehorning, tooth-pulling, ear-clipping, debeaking, tail-docking, and castration, and its confinement and severe movement restriction--causes farm animals intense pain and suffering for the duration of their lives. Since there is an alternative way of feeding ourselves, namely, eating a plant-based vegan diet, that doesn't require subjecting animals to such suffering, utilitarianism requires that we adopt a vegan diet.

Goldberg objects to this argument for ethical veganism on the grounds that most of the animals we routinely eat—i.e., cows, pigs, and chickens—are incapable of suffering, and hence, there is no suffering to take into account. How does Goldberg defend this startling claim? Appealing to the Buddhist doctrine of *four noble truths*, he contends that *dukkah*, i.e., suffering, is not to be understood as simple neurological pain, which can occur in any organism with nociceptors. Rather, suffering results from desires that go unmet. He tells us: “It is *desire* that brings about suffering, hence its elimination is possible only as a result of a being who is capable of re-conceptualizing the world.” Goldberg then argues roughly

roughly as follows:

1. A being is capable of suffering *only if* that being possesses desires.
2. A being possesses desires *only if* that being is self-conscious.
3. Apart from a few ‘higher’ mammals, animals are not self-conscious.

Therefore,

4. Apart from a few ‘higher’ mammals, animals are incapable of suffering.

This argument is open to numerous objections. First, it is not at all clear that self-consciousness is restricted to the few ‘higher’ mammals that Goldberg identifies. Antonio Damasio, a highly respected neuropsychologist, contends that selfhood and subjectivity are necessary conditions for consciousness *per se* and not just for self-consciousness. (Damasio 1994, 238). If Damasio is right, all the animals we routinely eat are self-conscious, since they are clearly conscious. The point is simply this: Given the current state of cognitive science, it is dangerous to speculate about which animals are self-conscious, especially when one has a desire to eat those deemed non-self-conscious.

Second, since Goldberg is concerned with conforming his views to biology and evolutionary reality, it’s worth noting that in *The Descent of Man* Charles Darwin, biologist and ethologist extraordinaire, argues that “there is no fundamental difference between man and the higher mammals in their mental faculties” (Darwin 1989, 27). Darwin begins with the observation that “The lower animals, like man, manifestly feel pleasure and pain, happiness and misery” (Darwin 1989, 27). [I assume by “misery” here he means something akin to suffering, since he is contrasting it with pain.] He then goes on to argue that lower animals including dogs, horses, elephants and other wild animals are excited by the same base emotions as humans including fear, suspicion, and jealousy and possess the same intellectual emotions and faculties including wonder, curiosity, attention, memory, imagination and reason. It would be very odd that animals would share all of these mental faculties with us, but not share the property of having desires.

Third, there is enormous behavioral evidence that animals possess desires—in particular, that they desire pleasurable stimuli (e.g., food, sex, grooming and being groomed) and that they desire to avoid

noxious stimuli (e.g., electric shocks, burns, and other painful stimuli). Moreover, possessing these desires would clearly have survival value (beings that didn't desire food or sex would quickly die out). Simply put, we have much better evidence that animals possess desires than that they are not self-conscious. As such, we should turn the above argument on its head and conclude that since animals possess desires either (a) self-consciousness isn't necessary for the possession of desires or (b) animals are self-conscious.

Finally, the above argument is in an important sense otiose. After all, utilitarians are concerned with minimizing pain, as well as suffering. Even if it were to turn out that animals are incapable of suffering, they clearly are capable of experiencing pain, and Goldberg admits as much. So, the utilitarian argument for ethical veganism based on minimizing unnecessary pain would still go through.

3. The High Elevation Argument

Goldberg accuses Singer of being guilty of a kind of *contextualist localization*, in that he doesn't appreciate that people living at elevations of 16,000 feet must rely on meat to survive. As Goldberg puts it:

As with the Tibetans, who are incapable of growing sufficient sustenance at 16,000 ft., hence the need to rely on meat, so humans in the past would have existed in environments in which survival would have demanded eating meat . . . The two conditions that come to mind immediately are pre-agricultural societies and, more emphatically, our survival during the ice-age. Both of these would have demanded an omnivorous diet. (Goldberg 2005, 7)

No utilitarian would deny that eating meat is permissible *in certain circumstances*. Certainly, neither Singer nor Norcross claim that eating meat is never permissible *under any circumstances*. According to utilitarianism, eating meat *is* permissible whenever there is no other option available that results in a better balance of pleasure over pain. Presumably, both Singer and Norcross would grant that eating meat is permissible when necessary for our survival, as in pre-agricultural and ice-age societies. Nevertheless, *we* are not living in a pre-agricultural society, and as far as I know, the ice-age is over. Whether or not it's permissible for human ice-age inhabitants to eat meat is irrelevant. The question is whether it is permissible *for us* to eat meat, and the utilitarian answer is: Not whenever there are equally nutritious plant-based foods available that produce a better balance of pleasure over pain. Since, in modern

societies, such plant-based foods are almost always available, utilitarianism entails that eating meat is almost always wrong.

4. The Monk Aping Argument

The argument goes something like this: Zen Buddhist monks, including some high-ranking senior Geshes, eat animals (provided others kill the animals for them). So, it's permissible for us to eat animals, provided others do the dirty work of killing those animals for us. To be fair, Goldberg doesn't explicitly offer this as an argument in defense of eating meat, but he does use monk behavior as a rhetorical device throughout the article, and in several places, he holds monk behavior up as a supposed model of ideal ethical behavior.

I submit that the monks he reveres and seeks to emulate are not worthy of emulation, at least where their dietary choices are concerned. Here's why: The First Precept of Buddhist ethical conduct is not to harm or kill sentient beings. The four sublime Buddhist virtues are loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. People who routinely dine on the bodies of inhumanely-raised and slaughtered animals while professing to embrace these Buddhist values are simply hypocrites. They simply are not living their lives in accordance with their professed values. How did the meat-eating monks attempt to reconcile the apparent inconsistency between their professed values and their practices? With what must have been intended as a Zen Koan: "Have you ever tried to be a vegetarian at 16,000 feet?" When Goldberg heard this rhetorical question, he came to the following conclusion: "environmental necessity . . . turned a Buddhist vegetarian dietary prescription into an omnivorous diet."

By my lights, it was human rationalization, not environmental necessity, that resulted in these Buddhists adopting an omnivorous diet. First, it's the 21st century. People today have quite a bit of choice about where they live. If it is impossible to maintain a vegetarian diet at 16,000 feet, the monks should have moved to a place where they could live in accordance with their professed values. Second, the suggestion that it is not possible to survive on a vegetarian diet at an elevation of 16,000 feet is ludicrous. Dried beans, whole grains, and flours last indefinitely without refrigeration. The monks could have easily stored enough beans and grains to last them through the winter without ever having to eating meat. After

all, to raise animals for food at 16,000 feet, these animals themselves have to be fed. What are they fed? Ground up grains and soybeans. These are foods that could, much more efficiently, be eaten directly by humans. Finally, even if it were absolutely necessary for these monks to eat meat in order to survive in their mountain monastery located 16,000 feet above sea level, this would in no way justify their current dietary practices here in the States. Westminster College is located in New Wilmington, PA, which boasts an elevation of 806 feet. No one in New Wilmington needs to eat meat to survive or thrive. In New Wilmington, like every other city in America, eating animals is entirely gratuitous. Even granting Goldberg his preferred contextualism, eating a large piece of a cruelly-raised and inhumanely-slaughtered steer, when doing so is not necessary for one's survival or health, violates the main tenets of Buddhist thought. Consistent Buddhists and consistent utilitarians agree that causing sentient beings unnecessary pain is wrong and ought not be supported or encouraged. The lesson these meat-eating monks should be espousing is: Do as we say, not as we do. Adopt our values, but not our practices. Surely, it's better to emulate a consistent Buddhist of integrity. Such a Buddhist would inspire us to eliminate our desire for meat, since doing so would prevent much *dukkah* (suffering), both our own and the animals'.

Conclusion

At one point in his paper, Goldberg asks: "What makes our eating of animals different from the lion whose taste is for young gazelles?" (Goldberg, 7). The answer is twofold: First, we have a choice, the lion doesn't. We can choose to eat something else instead and be healthier to boot. The lion can't. Second, we won't die if we refrain from eating animals, the lion will. This underscores a crucial point: Eating meat, while necessary for a lion, is totally unnecessary for humans living in modern societies. It's this latter fact that makes it so hard to justify the raising, slaughtering, and eating of animals. Any satisfactory defense of eating animals must explain why it is morally permissible to subject them to so much pain and premature death for no good reason. One thing's for sure: It will take a much meatier argument than the ones proffered by Goldberg to justify eating our fellow sentient creatures.

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¹ With apologies to Quine who made the point with respect to the selection of individuals, rather than the selection of genes.