

The Philosophy of Natural History Part II

We ended last week having looked at the distinction that human beings are naturally disposed to draw between natural and artificial events. Natural events tend to be thought of as those that are not answerable (or directly answerable) to human activity – for example, events such as volcanic eruptions and earthquakes, the actions of animals other than human beings. This raised certain questions – for example: should we conceive of species reintroduction programmes to be artificial human interference of the same kind as that which resulted in the loss of that species from the area of reintroduction?

Answers to that question are largely determined by how one conceives of the actions of human beings. If one conceives of them as artificial then such reintroduction programmes are as artificial as the actions that, in the eyes of many conservationists, made them necessary. On the other hand, if we conceive of human action as just another aspect of the evolution of the earth then the extinctions we cause, together with the reintroductions we may attempt, are as natural as anything else that occurs in nature.

A further question raised last week concerned the grounds that give rise to the term ‘artificial’ in the first place. One way of understanding this would be to say that the very fact that we have this concept at all (that it exists in our vocabulary) is partly expressive of the way in which human beings conceive of their place in the world. Immediately, two further questions arise. 1. If we accept the term “artificial” as having a legitimate place in our conceptualization of the world, how should we apply it? 2. Should we conceive of our actions as in any sense artificial? (If we answer in the negative, then the term “artificial” becomes redundant). I will leave you to think about this.

This week, our focus will be in two parts. The first will focus on the phenomenon of speciesism – most notably argued for by the philosopher Peter Singer in his book *Practical Ethics*. The second involves a more general (but no less nuanced) look at those dimensions of our existence that provide the grounds

for our conceptualization of the world. This will focus on themes in Raimond Gaita’s book *The Philosopher’s Dog*.

Speciesism

This is how Peter Singer defines speciesism:

“Racists violate the principle of equality by giving greater weight to the interests of members of their own race when there is a clash between their interests and the interests of those of another race. Racists of European descent typically have not accepted that pain matters as much when it is felt by Africans, for example, as when it is felt by Europeans. Similarly those I would call ‘speciesists’ give greater weight to the interests of members of their own species when there is a clash between their interests and the interests of those of other species. Human speciesists do not accept that pain is as bad.” (Singer, P. 1993. p.58)

Singer goes on to argue that, of course, we should treat human beings and animals differently but on the grounds of objective differences that exist between them, as opposed to just because they are a member of a different species.

“Normal adult human beings have mental capacities that will, in certain circumstances, lead them to suffer more than animals would in the same circumstances. If, for instance, we decided to perform extremely painful or lethal scientific experiments on normal adult humans, kidnapped at random from public parks for this purpose, adults who entered parks would become fearful that they would be kidnapped. The resultant terror would be a form of suffering additional to the pain of the experiment. The same experiments performed on nonhuman animals would cause less suffering since the animals would not have the anticipatory dread of being kidnapped and experimented upon. This does not mean, of course, that it would be right to perform the experiment on animals, but only that there is a reason, and one that is not speciesist, for preferring to use animals rather than normal adult humans, if the experiment is to be done at all.” (Singer, P. 1993. p.59)

However, this has certain consequences:

Note, however, that this same argument gives us a reason for preferring to use human infants - orphans perhaps - or severely intellectually disabled humans for experiments, rather than adults, since infants and severely intellectually disabled humans would also have no idea of what was going to happen to them. As far as this argument is concerned, nonhuman animals and infants and severely intellectually disabled humans are in the same category; and if we use this argument to justify experiments on nonhuman animals we have to ask ourselves whether we are also prepared to allow experiments on human infants and severely intellectually disabled adults. If we make a distinction between animals and these humans, how can we do it, other than on the basis of a morally indefensible preference for members of our own species? (Singer, P. 1993. p.59-60)

Singer also believes that

“What is needed now is a willingness to follow the arguments where they lead, without a prior assumption that the issue is not worth our attention”. (Singer, P. 1993. p.56)

This latter point runs directly counter to the position I put to you a few classes ago – namely, that in the realm of ethics, it is often the conclusions of arguments that are used as the means to discredit what led us to them. For an example of this, consider the idea of turning our human dead into food for our pets, livestock and such like. This thought could be justified on environmental grounds, for instance. The current scale of farmed meat production is globally unsustainable, and is also responsible for between 15-24% of our greenhouse gas emissions.¹ By using processed human meat to subsidise animal feeds, the amount of animal meat produced could be cut, together with pressures on the earth’s resources and greenhouse gas emissions. That, in turn, would have

¹ Cf. Fiala, N. ‘Meeting the demand: An estimation of potential future greenhouse gas emissions from meat production’ in *Ecological Economics* 67 (2008) pp.412-419

long-term benefits – among them, the prevention of climate change induced suffering and loss of life.

This argument is dismissed, not because it does not make sense (indeed, from a practical environmental point of view it makes a good deal of sense), but because its conclusion is morally abhorrent and, as such, cannot be considered as a genuine option; it is question of *what it means* to embrace such a conclusion. Someone who seriously suggested it as an option runs the risk of being understood as pathologically unhinged. Indeed, the person who argues that it is merely a psychological barrier which prevents us from seriously entertaining such an argument (even if, in the end, it is not adopted because a different scheme is more practical) fails to recognise that to successfully overcome such a barrier would entail becoming wicked or embracing evil. Singer fails to recognise this; he would argue that, all things being equal, we are wrong to think of severely intellectually disabled humans as having any more of a moral claim on us than animals with similar intellectual capacities (because it would be speciesist). He would also, almost certainly, endorse the canning of our dead for pet food on the basis of the argument I made in favour of it above.

Some Comments

Returning to the artificial/natural distinction with which we started. What we have is two ways in which we conceive of what we do in relation to ourselves and the natural world. Both however, are still answerable to some form of that distinction; it is a question of deciding between them and understanding the meaning of that decision. Can we control what matters for us? Can we, through force of intellect, convince others of what *should* matter or the ways in which it should matter? To answer such questions is a complex business but I would suggest that if we are change the minds of others about what matters then attention needs to be paid to the fact that we can only do so with the concepts that are available to us and an understanding of the foundations of such concepts. Thus, in relation to Singer’s position, we need to ask whether the IQ of a

person or animal, along with the various abilities to which such capacities give rise, is what conditions our sense of the preciousness of other human beings and the natural world more generally.

Raimond Gaita comments that:

“It matters too that a child can be loved before it is born and that the love is made possible—mediated—by the pleasure that the mother (and others) can take in the changes in her body, changes which appear to us as beautiful. In the perception of that beauty, love becomes concrete and finds its tender expression. I doubt that a foetus growing in a glass jar on the mantelpiece could be an object of loving tenderness, though it would, of course, be a focus of concerned attention. Indeed it is the celebration in our art of a love mediated by the changes in a woman’s body that has given sense to the expression ‘being with child’. That—like ‘of my own flesh and blood’—is an expression in the language of love and is misunderstood when it become the focus of contentious philosophical, theological or scientific theorising about the ‘objective’ properties of the foetus. The foetus is something that can rightly be loved, love made lucid by language which shows up not only love’s false semblances, but also other responses, such as resentment, for example. It is astonishing how many people find that of less importance than whether the foetus is a rational being.” (Gaita, R. 2003. p.192-3)

He says later:

“[T]here is such a thing—a beautiful thing—as disinterested love of nature, even of inanimate nature, and that love can limit our will in a way that looks like the kind of limit that people have in mind when they talk of rights. I think it foolish to talk of the rights of trees or even of spiders, but that is partly because I think it is mistaken to talk of rights in the case of human beings. (Gaita, R. 2003. p.199-200)

My claim that, in the realm of ethics (that is, matters of value), it is often the conclusions of arguments that are used as the means to discredit what led us to them can now be shown up as answerable to the *form*

of significance that certain things (and ways of living) have for us. A foetus in a glass jar on the mantelpiece is significant in the sense that it would be the focus of concerned attention but that form is distinct from a loving tenderness that is rooted in a form of beauty that is not merely answerable to ensuring that such a foetus reaches maturity.

The same might be said in relation to the natural world. There are many reasons that are cited in favour of this or that conservation project. Utilitarian reasons are quite common – we should, for example, ensure the welfare of bees because they are essential to the pollination of our crops and, as such, the reduction of starvation in human beings. Other reasons include the fact that plants and animals can be used as ecological barometers – we need such barometers for all sorts of reasons, therefore we should try to conserve them.

But our fellow creatures, when we take the time to look, can also inspire wonder and sympathy and, in such ways, provide us with a sense of what it means to be a human being and fellow creature. Bees can be synonymous with lazy summer afternoons and the provision of honey; butterflies exemplify a stunning delicate beauty combined with a high degree of vulnerability; birds and their sounds can be redolent of despair and joy. All of them can be seen as vulnerable to misfortune – either at the hands of human beings or for other reasons. This and much more besides conditions our sense of their preciousness in ways that run far deeper than utility.