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To Breed, or Not to Breed?:

An Antinatalist Answer to the Question of Animal Welfare

Sayma H. Chowdhury and Todd K. Shackelford

Oakland University

Address correspondence to Sayma H. Chowdhury, Oakland University, Department of Psychology, Pryale Hall, Rochester, Michigan, 48309, USA. Email: shchowd3@oakland.edu. We are grateful to Stevan Harnad, Yew-Kwang Ng, and Catherine Salmon for comments on a draft of this article.

Abstract

Although Ng (2016) addresses the important question of how to increase animal welfare, he does not address an equally important question—how to *prevent* animal suffering. The best way to prevent animal suffering is to stop breeding them. With fewer sentient beings in existence, net suffering is lessened. Even if captive animals were bred with a guarantee of “net happiness,” they would still suffer at some point in their lives, and sometimes very much. We argue that not only is nonexistence preferable to existence, but also that even in research there are many preferable alternatives to the use of captive animals.

Keywords: animal welfare, antinatalism, breeding, reproduction, suffering

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Ng (2016) contends that welfare biology can inform decisions regarding animal welfare, and offers several practical suggestions for reducing the suffering of nonhuman animals in captivity. Although these suggestions are commendable, we present an antinatalist perspective on the issue, and argue that ceasing to breed captive animals would not just reduce but eliminate their suffering altogether.

Antinatalism¹ is usually applied to humans, but can also be applied to other animals. Benatar (1997, 2006) proposes that the presence of pain is bad, whereas the presence of pleasure is good. Most people will agree with these propositions. However, he further proposes that there is an asymmetry in the *absence* of pain and pleasure for beings that are not brought into existence: the absence of pain is good, but the absence of pleasure is not bad. The absence of pleasure affects no one because there is no one to be deprived of pleasure, so it is “not bad.” On the other hand, a potential being is spared suffering if it is not brought into existence, which is good. According to Benatar, therefore, coming into existence is never a benefit to the sentient animal; it is always a harm.

Ng (1995) defines welfare as “net happiness (enjoyment minus suffering).” But by virtue of bringing sentient beings into existence, one guarantees some amount of suffering. Often this suffering is not insignificant, especially in the case of animals bred specifically for human consumption as food, fashion, experimental subjects, or companion animals (Singer, 2009). Even if we reduce the suffering of these animals, they often endure a variety of health problems and

¹ Antinatalism posits that procreation of sentient beings is morally wrong, because existence subjects the sentient being to suffering that would not have been experienced had that being not been produced. See Benatar (2006) for a detailed review and discussion of antinatalism.

ailments and, of course, they will die, often accompanied by considerable suffering. Ng (1995) also discusses assessing animal welfare levels as positive or negative—but, again, this neglects the issue of whether it is morally defensible to breed animals knowing that most of them will be used for human purposes and that all of them will die, necessitating some suffering, even in the best of situations. For example, if we can ensure an animal's suffering is kept to a minimum and its pleasure maximized, the animal would have a positive welfare level according to Ng (1995). However, eliminating suffering is impossible, so it is better not to bring an animal into existence because it would be spared definite suffering. From an antinatalist perspective, welfare levels are always negative, on balance. So even if welfare is increased (which should certainly be pursued once the animal is brought into existence), suffering is a constant that cannot be eliminated by attempting to make an animal more comfortable. And the more animals there are, the more suffering there will be.

Ng (2016) proposes some “simple and low-cost” ways to improve the welfare of captive animals. Although larger cages for factory-farmed chickens are an improvement, their breeding should stop. Factory-farmed animals endure some of the worst living conditions, and animal rights advocates would rather these animals had not come into existence because of the magnitude of their suffering (Singer, 2009). Even if factory farmed animals’ welfare were maximized in accordance with Ng’s definition of welfare, they are still being bred to suffer and die. And death is, in and of itself, an episode of suffering.

More animals are bred for food or clothing than for research, but a substantial number of them are bred to be utilized as lab animals (Singer, 2009). The U.S. Congress, Office of Technology Assessment reported in 1986 that an estimated 17 to 22 million animals were used for research every year in the United States. The consequences of a cessation of medical research

conducted on animals are arguably worse than refusing to eat animal products, or boycotting clothing made with animal furs and skins. Without the continuation of such research, we might miss opportunities to develop novel and effective procedures or treatments for diseases like cancer or cardiovascular disease. We argue below that this may not be the case, and that the reduction in net suffering from ending the breeding of lab animals may outweigh the purported benefits of using them as substitutes in human medical research.

Non-human animals have long been used in research, both as analogues for humans, and as the primary subjects of study. When animals are used as analogues in research (usually as human replacements), they are often subjected to stressful and painful procedures that harm them, permanently damage them, or kill them. A great number of these animals are bred for the sole purpose of research (Singer, 2009). They are often marketed and sold in the same way that inanimate objects are marketed and sold. Alongside concerns about the welfare of laboratory animals is the issue of generalizability. Can the results of research conducted on laboratory rats be generalized to humans? There are marked differences between rats and humans that may mean that a procedure or drug that is effective on a rat might be ineffective, or worse, detrimental when administered to humans. Closer non-human relatives like the chimpanzee are now considered off-limits for invasive research by most researchers and governing bodies. Why not extend this moral consideration to other animals? To stop using animal models in research is not to stem the flow of research; indeed, without a reason to innovate, scientists will continue to use animal models. Take away those animal analogues, and scientists will be forced, for example, to develop synthetic skin that functions like the human equivalent (Tee, Wang, Allen, & Bao, 2012). Without a need for animal models, companies will end the breeding of lab animals, thus resulting in a reduction of suffering.

Concern about other animals is a relatively recent phenomenon, and this is perhaps why it can be difficult to pass legislation for the betterment of their living conditions (Singer, 2009). We should do what we can to minimize the suffering of those animals already in existence, but we should also consider ending the breeding of captive animals. This will ensure that fewer suffering sentient beings are created, thus decreasing the overall amount of suffering. However, implementation of programs that end animal breeding altogether would be difficult to ratify. The pervasive usage of animals as entertainment, companions, research tools, clothing, and food makes this improbable. So, although we have argued that it is better never to bring sentient beings into existence on account of their guaranteed suffering, we acknowledge that the likelihood of persuading the majority of people to consider this perspective is unlikely.

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