

Comment

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Conflicts of Interests: Kittens and Boa Constrictors, Pets and Research

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Psychological research with animals has come under fire from antivivisectionists for the past 100 years (Dewsbury, 1990). Although these attacks have increased dramatically over the past 15 years, many psychologists have been slow to recognize the implications of the animal rights movement for the conduct of behavioral and biomedical research (Johnson, 1990). Scientists sometimes dismiss the animal rights movement with the claim that it is fueled primarily by emotion, not logic. However, those who make the effort to become familiar with the arguments of philosophers such as Peter Singer (1975) and Tom Regan (1983) may be surprised at the rigor and power of some of their arguments (reviewed by Herzog, 1990a).

In a series of interviews with animal rights activists, I have found that the attempt to maintain consistency between ethical stance and lifestyle is a major force underlying the behavior changes that come with commitment to this movement (Herzog, 1990b). But many animal advocates do not recognize that even apparently benign relations with other species often produce conflicts of interest that ultimately result in some of the same ethical difficulties faced by those of us who use animals for research (see Gallup & Suarez, 1987). The incident described below illustrates the kind of paradox that can result when the peculiarities of human psychology confront the conflicts of interests

that seem to inevitably emerge when species interact.

Feeding Kittens to Boa Constrictors

Several years ago I received a call from a man who had awakened to find that his female boa constrictor had given birth to 42 babies. He was understandably shocked as he had kept the seven-foot female caged in his living room with her even larger mate for eight years with no sign of conjugal relations between the two. He contacted me for tips on raising baby snakes because he had heard that I studied the behavior of newborn reptiles. He wound up giving my son one of the babies, and the snake, Sam, is now a family pet.

Recently, a friend of mine who is an animal rights activist was contacted by a woman who complained that I was procuring kittens from a local animal shelter for snake food. Distressed, the informant insisted that the local animal rights group take action to prevent me from using cats to satisfy Sam's appetite. My initial response to the accusation was to laugh. I have had several pet cats and am as susceptible to the neotenic charms of kittens as the next person. As much as I like Sam, I found the idea of his swallowing kittens appalling. In addition, Sam is about two feet long and it will be a long time before he is able to gulp down even a small kitty.

After a chuckle, however, I began to reflect on the ethics of Sam's diet. My accuser inadvertently forced me to consider a series of questions related to moral ambiguities inherent in keeping pets. Given his nutritional needs, is it moral to have a boa constrictor for a pet? Under what, if any, circumstances would it be moral to feed kittens to a snake? Finally, given that we live in an ethically complex world, is keeping a kitten any more or any less moral than maintaining a pet snake? The following discussion is the result of my musings on these questions. (Note that I am concerned here solely with moral issues related to what pets eat, not with other aspects of pet-keeping, such as their subservient role to humans.)

First, a couple of assumptions and an irrefutable biological fact. The first assumption is that some immoral acts are

more immoral than others. Murder is immoral. But, other considerations being equal (e.g., the degree of suffering involved), it is more immoral to kill 10 innocent people than 1 innocent person. Similarly, whereas it is immoral to exceed the speed limit while driving through a school zone, it is more immoral to go 70 miles per hour in front of a school than 33 miles per hour. This concept is recognized by the judicial system, which metes out different punishments depending on the severity of the crime. My second assumption is borrowed from animals rights philosophers themselves. Human likes and dislikes about an animal species are often based on emotional criteria such as how cute they are and how we define their social roles (Burghardt & Herzog, 1980), and I will go along with Singer (1975) and Regan (1983) in assuming that anthropocentric human aesthetic preferences, which invariably result in a scale on which kittens rank higher than snakes, are not particularly relevant to the ethics of how an animal or species should be treated. Logically, the ability to suffer and feel pain seems a more relevant criteria for making decisions about the use of a species than the fact that it has big eyes. The irrefutable biological fact on which my argument is based is that some creatures can only survive by eating other creatures.

Ethics of Pet Food

Consider the ethics of feeding pets. The person who accused me of offering live kittens to Sam is a cat lover. She keeps several at home, and they have free range of both her house and the surrounding woods. Cats are obligate carnivores and, unlike humans and dogs, they must consume other animals in order to meet their nutritional requirements. Each day, the majority of cats in this country are given the canned flesh of a wide variety of vertebrates. I recently surveyed the cat food shelves of my local supermarket and found tinned pig, cow, turkey, chicken, horse, and even the particularly morally suspect tuna fish and veal. Even dried cat food was advertised as containing "fresh meat."

Feline food habits create an ecological problem of considerable magnitude.

There are approximately 54 million cats in the United States, each of which consume the equivalent of three ounces of vertebrate meat per day. Needless to say, large numbers of animals are slaughtered annually ultimately to satisfy the needs of cat fanciers for affection. Furthermore, most cats spend at least part of their day out of doors. Anyone who has lived with cats soon develops respect, perhaps even grudging admiration, for their predatory proclivities and effective hunting techniques, and even cats that are well fed by their owners have a strong urge to hunt natural prey (Turner & Meister, 1988).

It has recently been shown that pet cats can wreak havoc on populations of small mammals and birds in suburban neighborhoods. Churcher and Lawton (1989), in a study of the feeding ecology of cats in England, estimated that the 5 million domestic cats in Britain kill at least 70 million small animals per year, 20 million of which are birds. It is ironic that many cat lovers also enjoy birds and maintain feeders in their back yards, inadvertently luring these hapless creatures to their deaths at the claws of the family pet. All of this is simply to suggest that there are significant ethical problems raised by the diet of pet cats. In fact, if each of the pet cats in the United States killed only two mice, chipmunks, or baby birds each year, the number of animals slaughtered by pets would greatly exceed the number of animals used for research.

What about the morality of keeping boa constrictors as pets? Like cats, snakes are carnivorous. Unlike cats, boas have a very low metabolism, which means that they do not eat very much; they can go for months without eating at all and with no apparent discomfort or adverse health effects. Indeed, a recent field study found that the typical seven-foot boa constrictor living in the jungles of Central America ingests the equivalent of about six rats per year (H. Greene, personal communication, August 1987). A pet snake consumes a very small fraction of the vertebrate flesh eaten by the typical house cat. Hence, under the first assumption, it would seem to follow that the dietary habits of boa constrictors pose a moral problem of somewhat lesser magnitude than the diet of cats because of the difference in the numbers of animals that die in order to feed the pet population.

However, given that boa constrictors need to eat, what should we feed them? Right now, Sam eats mice that I purchase from a pet shop for about one dollar each. To minimize the suffering of these creatures, I kill them before I give them to the snake. I am the first to admit that

I am troubled by this aspect of snake-keeping and would much prefer the option typically chosen by cat owners: They have someone else do their killing for them by purchasing cans of animal flesh at the supermarket. My local store does not stock canned mice, and Sam would probably not like it even if it were available. Furthermore, I do not particularly like the idea that mice are being raised simply to become snake food. (Neither do I like the idea that some dogs are raised just to be research subjects when "pound" animals are available; more animals ultimately die.) However, I do not see an easy way out of this dilemma. Sam was an accident. He was not born so that my son could have a pet snake. But, like it or not, he is here, and if I do not feed him, he will starve to death. If I gave Sam away, the moral burden of his diet would simply be shifted to his new owner.

Finally, Sam is growing. In a couple of years he will need something larger than mice to eat. What am I going to feed him? If I give him rats, or chickens, I will be faced with the same problem posed by feeding him mice: The animals are being raised simply to be eaten. Given the moral ambiguities of pet keeping, I would feel a lot better if Sam could subsist on animals that were going to be killed anyway. Which brings me back to kittens.

Each year in the United States at least 6 million unwanted cats are "put to sleep," a euphemism for euthanasia, itself a euphemism for being killed. Some of them are killed by injection, some are gassed, some are left by roadsides where they are hit by cars. You can probably see where this is going.

The question is the one unknowingly raised by my accuser: Is it immoral to feed kittens to big snakes? I think the answer is yes. However, I suspect that it is also immoral to feed pieces of calves, horses, pigs, fish, and song birds to cats. Remember the first assumption. Given that each snake eats a lot fewer vertebrates than each kitty, keeping a pet snake would seem less immoral than keeping a pet cat.

To take the argument further, let me rephrase the question slightly and ask, is it more immoral to feed kittens to snakes than rats to snakes? I suggest that it depends on the source of the animal. If the rats and the kittens were born and raised for the purposes of becoming snake food, then the act of feeding either to snakes is equally immoral. However, what about the choice between feeding the snake a rat raised to be snake food or a kitten who will be "put to sleep" because it is unwanted? Are we not forced to conclude that feeding the kitten to the snake is a

less immoral choice than feeding the rat to it? Could it be that it is immoral *not* to feed unwanted kittens awaiting euthanasia to the population of captive snakes in homes and zoos that are currently scarfing up the thousands of small furry mammals that are raised solely as snake food? In the long run, fewer creatures would be killed to satisfy a powerful human motive—the urge to keep pets (Serpell, 1986).

Human Psychology and Moral Decisions

I admit to being troubled by my own line of argument. It violates my moral intuition that, illogically, places cute kittens higher on the proverbial scale than beady-eyed rats. I do not intend to pick up a cat for Sam each month at my local animal "shelter," and I expect that most readers share my aversion to feeding even about-to-be-euthanized kittens to snakes. The fact that we find the specter of feeding cats to snakes repugnant tells us something about how we make moral decisions as they pertain to animals. Kittens are adorable. Adult cats are generally not as cute, but still, we would not want to feed them to snakes. Why? I suspect that the reason has to do with their social definition as "companions," not "pet food," a topic addressed more fully elsewhere (Herzog, 1988).

Furthermore, it seems to me that feeding kittens to boa constrictors (or cat food to cats) is a metaphor for all of our relations with other species, including animal research. Any use of an animal, be it for research or companionship, poses conflicts of interests—between researcher and lab animal, pet owner and pet, predator and prey. Many animal rights advocates are reluctant to acknowledge that using animals for any human purpose, even to satisfy our needs to nurture other species, is fraught with ethical ambiguities. The owners of both kittens and snakes place the interests of their pet ahead of the unfortunate animals that the pet must eat. Is this really so different from researchers who place the interests of sick animals or humans ahead of those animals that are "subjects" of research designed to find ways of alleviating suffering?

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