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Wild animal suffering and vegan outreach

Commentary on [Ng](#) on *Animal Suffering*

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Abstract: Ng's strategic proposal seems to downplay the potential benefits of advocacy for wild animals and omit what may be the most effective strategy to reduce the harms farmed animals suffer: vegan outreach.

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Underestimating the importance of wild animal suffering. Ng's (2016) view is not that animal advocates should focus only on farmed animals, to the exclusion of those that live in the wild. He concedes that our efforts must also be directed toward raising awareness of the harms suffered by animals in nature. Nonetheless, he seems to suggest that these efforts should be minimal relative to those devoted to reducing the harms farmed animals suffer.

Ng underestimates the potential benefits of advocacy for wild animals in terms of net reduction in suffering perhaps because he is overestimating people's resistance to caring about wild animals and to intervening in nature on their behalf. He may also be underestimating the magnitude and moral importance of wild animal suffering, even though in 1995 it was Ng himself who emphasized the predominance of suffering over positive well-being in nature.

In 2016 Ng writes that "we should put [...] more [emphasis] on the environment and true welfare for both humans and other animals"; that "[t]he additional consideration of animal welfare further strengthens the case for greater conservation and against environmental disruption"; and that "it may be that environmental and animal welfare protection is not really costly at all." Here Ng is implicitly assuming that environmental conservation and the reduction of animal suffering are compatible aims. That may be true regarding the suffering of farmed animals. But it appears to be at odds with Ng's own analysis (1995), according to which suffering vastly outweighs positive well-being in the lives of wild animals.

Omitting vegan outreach. According to Ng (2016) "the initial focus of animal welfare advocates [should] be on reducing the enormous gratuitous suffering in factory farming." He is concerned to find the most effective strategies for achieving that aim. Yet of the several potential regulations he considers, only one is related to factory farming (better regulation

of the chicken industry). There is one other example from the food industry (fish mongers), but it concerns small-scale local practices rather than factory farming.

One wonders why Ng focuses on such examples to further what he regards as our initial priority rather than other strategies, affecting many more animals. Perhaps this is because Ng is only concerned in this paper with strategies for reducing suffering through institutional change (e.g., legal reform). Within the set of regulation-oriented strategies, those he mentions might indeed be the most cost-effective ones to pursue. Yet if our goal is to reduce the suffering of farmed animals, other strategies might be more beneficial.

Analyses by meta-charities suggest that vegan outreach is a more effective strategy to help farmed animals. This is the strategy of convincing individuals that they must cease to consume animal products, for the sake of the animals themselves. The costs of lobbying to achieve legal reform are simply too high, and the gains in nonhuman wellbeing too low in comparison. Presently, through legal reform one can only hope to attain better regulations against cruelty, or a prohibition of practices which affect relatively few individuals (such as foie gras production). In contrast, according to the estimates of Animal Charity Evaluators, with merely \$1,000 an organisation dedicated to vegan outreach would spare 13,200 animals from suffering and dying in the industry ([Animal Charity Evaluators](#), 2014).

The kind of advocacy Ng proposes can make a difference for many animals. But vegan outreach may have a greater impact, both for short-term behavioural changes and long-term attitudinal ones. This suggests that, in line with Ng's own aims, what we ought to do for farmed animals is the most effective vegan outreach possible.

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