

Rutledge-Prior, Serrin. 2023. "Just fodder: The ethics of feeding animals". *Contemporary Political Theory*. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41296-023-00616-6>

## **Just fodder: The ethics of feeding animals**

Josh Milburn

McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal & Kingston, 2022, viii+232pp., ISBN: 978-0-2280-1151-4

In the first substantive chapter of *Just Fodder*, Josh Milburn outlines his account of the 'animal lovers' paradox' (21). This paradox arises when self-professed animal lovers feed their companion animals with protein derived from the (often tortured) bodies of other animals. This leads to the troubling notion that these people would better serve animals overall if they *weren't* animal lovers – fewer meat-eating companion animals might mean fewer animals rendered into eaten meat.

This description called to mind something that has been troubling me as I keep up-to-date with the post-rescue lives of the various 'speed noodles' (greyhounds) that I follow on social media. Companion humans, seemingly oblivious to any irony inherent in doing so, often post videos of their long-snouted friends and family members enthusiastically 'monching' on 'chimken' and other meat-based treats and elaborately prepared dishes (canine-friendly chicken laksas seem to be all the rage at the moment). It is unsettling, seeing dogs who have been rescued from one exploitative and often cruel industry by humans who are well informed about, and often vocal critics of this industry, being fed the flesh of other sentient creatures, who have also suffered within an exploitative (and even crueller) industry. Of course, the dogs themselves cannot be held morally responsible for any wrong-doing in this instance. But if a wrong has taken place, who is to be held accountable, and what is to be done? After all, might it not be harmful to feed non-herbivorous companion animals a plant-based diet? These are just some of the questions, often ignored by animal ethicists and vegans alike, with which *Just Fodder* grapples.

It is not only those with a particular concern for animals for whom these questions should be of interest. As Milburn makes clear, we are *all* implicated in whether and how various animals are fed. Such animals include the companion dogs, cats, and members of other species who we regard as a part of our families, but also the birds we feed in our gardens, the field mice who eat our crops, the rescued animals who convalesce in rehabilitation centres, and the animals who face starvation or predation in the wild. It is discussions of these different categories of animals (family members, neighbours, thieves, refugees, and strangers, respectively) and the ethical issues that arise in relation to how they eat and how they are fed, that form later chapters of the book.

First, however, Milburn outlines the ethical account that he uses to tease out the different kinds of obligations that exist in relation to these groups. Drawing on the work of Donaldson and Kymlicka in *Zoopolis* (2011) and Clare Palmer in *Animals in Context* (2010), Milburn's ethical framework is one of relational, positive obligations on the part of humans, supplementing animals' basic negative rights. Such negative rights are drawn from the fundamental interests that all (sentient) animals have, such as not experiencing extreme suffering and not being killed. From here, Milburn acknowledges the role of relationships in how we ground our positive duties: we have stronger duties towards those with whom we have stronger relationships. Proponents of a more Singerian, 'blind' utilitarianism might object that this invites morally unjustified prejudices (roughly, why should the suffering of my friend here count more than the suffering of a stranger over there, all else being equal?). However, Milburn argues relationships are important, as they

allow animal theorists to provide an account of positive duties towards animals in a way that previous utilitarian and rights-based accounts of animal ethics have not (p. 11).

Its hybrid ethical framework is a key strength of *Just Fodder*. Drawing on concepts such as interests, rights, and relationality, the book speaks to those with a range of different ethical commitments. A benefit of this approach, furthermore, is that it does not require we suspend disbelief to imagine a world in which the importance of relationships, whether familial or national, no longer hold purchase on our moral intuitions and legal systems. For those who do not see the value in such intuitions and systems, one may read *Just Fodder* as an exercise in non-ideal theory – as offering a transitional account guiding us closer to a future in which relational prejudices no longer exist. For the rest of us, the book can be seen as presenting an ‘ideal’ approach to our relations with animals that, nevertheless, offers a number of non-idealistic conclusions.

But what of the concern outlined in the first paragraph? Specifically, given Milburn’s account rests on the moral premise that all sentient animals’ interests need to be taken seriously, how can we handle cases in which feeding animals seems to necessarily involve killing other animals? While dogs may be omnivorous, how are we ever to be ethical in feeding our cats? As Milburn notes, citing evidence that cats can ‘thrive’ on vegan diets, animals ‘require specific nutrients, rather than specific ingredients’ (p. 35). As such, where ethical, plant-based diets do not fulfill our companions’ nutritional requirements, we should supplement their diets with the appropriate nutrients, perhaps via ethically sourced eggs or non-sentient animals (pp. 38-41; pp. 44-7). In the slightly longer term, *in vitro* meat offers a promising ethical alternative (pp. 41-44). On this account, then, we need neither ignore our ethical obligations nor conclude that companion animals should be sterilised out of existence (see Francione and Charlton 2012). Cat-lovers – though perhaps not all vegans – can therefore breathe a sigh of relief.

A conclusion that is a little more troubling is raised in the final substantive chapter, ‘Animal Strangers’. Here, Milburn discusses our potential obligations to assist wild animals in need: those who are lacking food and those at risk of becoming food. Milburn does not consider the possibility that we have a duty of *justice* to aid wild animals, but rather that we have one of *beneficence*. That is, while it would be good of us to offer assistance, we are not strictly required to do so. Assuming we *do* have duties of beneficence to aid wild animals – and he claims that ‘it is plausible’ that we do (176) – Milburn tentatively suggests that there are instances in which it would be a good thing for human societies to intervene in cases of starvation and predation.

While this speculative conclusion might trouble those who are sceptical of widespread and systemic human interference in the lives of animals and their communities (see Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011: 176), the concerns that I want to highlight here lie elsewhere. Milburn motivates his response to the question of whether we should interfere in the case of predation with the claim that ‘the suffering in nature is gargantuan’ (p. 161). However, in making this claim, his account seems to conflate concepts such as pain, suffering, injury, and (early) death, and assumes that a widespread suffering (or pain) across a species or within an individual may be reason – in the utilitarian calculus – for that species or individual not to exist. However, the distinction between suffering and pain – whereby the former usually implies some kind of mental anguish on top of, or in addition to, physical pain – is not made. And while there is certainly a lot of pain in the wild, the case has not been made here for suffering, or what the different implications of each are. Yet even assuming there *is* ‘gargantuan suffering’ in nature, we need to be careful when relying on our intuitions about whether, or how much, suffering (or pain or injury) renders a life not worth living – a point well made by many disability rights scholars (Taylor 2017). If we reject – or remain suspicious of – the claims that pain is tantamount to suffering, or that widespread

suffering in the wild does suggest many wild animals' lives are not worth living, then the proposal for widespread interventions to 'save' (certain) wild animals arguably become less convincing.

*Just Fodder* paves the way for a new road of enquiry into a topic that is not itself new at all: we have been directly or indirectly impacting on animals' diets for millennia. That philosophers – to say nothing of political theorists – have largely failed to seriously address the ethics of feeding animals is likely a reflection of how they have, until relatively recently, failed to take animal ethics in general seriously. *Just Fodder* – beyond being itself a lucid and thoughtful account of an important topic – is therefore a heartening indication of the current state of animal ethics, and an exciting sign of the inquiries still to come.

Serrin Rutledge-Prior  
Australian National University, Acton, ACT 0200 Australia | Ngunnawal country  
[serrin.rutledge-prior@anu.edu.au](mailto:serrin.rutledge-prior@anu.edu.au)

### References

- Donaldson, Sue, and Will Kymlicka. 2011. *Zoopolis: A Political Theory of Animal Rights*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Francione, Gary, and Anna Charlton. 2015. *Animal Rights: The Abolitionist Approach*. San Bernardino: Exempla Press.
- Palmer, Clare. 2010. *Animal Ethics in Context*. New York: Colombia University Press.
- Taylor, Sunaura. 2017. *Beasts of Burden: Animal and Disability Liberation*. New York: The New Press.