OPPOSINGVIEWS

In Defense of Lou and Bill, the Oxen at Green Mountain College

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"...lift up my face, like an innocent cow, in pity..." (Sumerian poem, c. 2000 BC).

For several days I have been losing sleep over Bill and Lou, the oxen that Green Mountain College (GMC) plans to slaughter because, after ten years of ploughing the fields of the university farm, they are no longer fit for work, and their continued existence would represent an irresponsible waste of resources.

At no time in my life have I specialised in philosophy or the science of agriculture (my current academic research is about a certain category of Iranian criminal trial and the associated Shi'i jurisprudence). Therefore I have quickly had to acquaint myself with facts, principles, and schools of thought that were heretofore almost entirely unfamiliar to me. This endeavour has occupied considerable time and has often been rather draining, as have my probably futile efforts to argue in favour of the oxen's lives. Around half way through the period in which I was immersed in this topic, I spent three days unable to look leftwards or tilt my head back, because I had sat so long in front of my minuscule computer that my neck and shoulder muscles had reached epic heights of tightness which, according to my doctor, had slightly displaced one of my upper ribs.

But whenever I wanted to sleep or join my husband for dinner, one thought kept me at my keyboard, namely: I will not choose my comfort over their lives.

The thought of going on a mysterious journey in a confined space, and then, at the end of it, being forced – perhaps with prods of various kinds – to leave that space, constricting but preferable to what might lie beyond, and walk up a ramp into a room smelling of blood and fear; the thought of having a bolt shot between my eyes, then being strung upside down, perhaps not yet unconscious, and having my throat cut open so that I might exsanguinate for the pleasure and convenience of my betters – that kept me at my post. Because these oxen may not have the benefit of language, and perhaps they do not engage in flights of fancy to rival mine; but when it comes to fear, and pain, and not wanting to die, each of them is another me.

I happen to know that considerable numbers of people have similarly chosen to forgo sleep and comfort in their efforts to persuade the oxen's keepers to spare them. But what strikes me as extraordinary is that in the same way, other people have sat down, conducted research, and written lengthy tracts, probably also in preference to sleep or comfort, in service of precisely the opposite goal: to ensure that the oxen be killed. And furthermore, this has been presented as noble, because it required that the unsophisticated urge of compassion be set aside in favour of something more worthy and certainly more clever – some principle of other, some argument or other. And this was evidence of how selfless and adult one could be, bending over backwards to accommodate noble abstractions and contending viewpoints in spite of one's primitive, sentimental, anthropomorphising desire not to kill.

But is compassion really so silly and primitive?

The first thing that occurs to one – in early infancy – is that one's own interests are paramount, and this is quite obvious because one perceives them, and nobody else's, directly. It really is, initially, about 'me me me'. One wants the toy and attempts to get it; the bawls and sniffles of one's little playmate are immaterial, because they are not one's own bawls and sniffles, and in one's own universe, a clear improvement has been achieved: one has the toy. One does not stop and think that in another universe, a universe which cannot a priori be assigned lesser value simply because it is not part of one's own immediate perception, there has been a clear loss: the toy (a present from granny, perhaps) is gone, and a certain degree of misery ensues.

But eventually one starts to think. Perhaps this is because a respected elder admonishes one by asking: "How would you feel if someone did this to you?" Whichever event, whichever admonition, precipitates this, one starts to think, one starts to recognise other minds, one starts to admit to oneself that they are equivalent to one's own, and one can no longer deny to oneself that there is no automatic hierarchy of importance between one's own interests and those of others, because to them, they are 'me' and one is just another 'someone else'. For some people this is illustrated in a concrete manner when an injurious act one earlier perpetrated upon another is later inflicted upon oneself, and one has no leg to stand on: "You did it to them, so you can't complain if they do it to you".

A similar progression has occurred – with some setbacks, indubitably – in the history of human groups. At first it was all 'me me me' – my hunting band, my group, my city-state, my country, my race. I – We – could invade Them, lay them low, topple their walls, burn their towers, take their gems, enslave their children and thereby reap only glory, because amidst their wailing, what mattered was that We had gained an improvement. What mattered was not how They felt, but how We felt. (Later, of course, They did the same to us and We didn't have a leg to stand on). As time passed, the notion 'wait a moment, maybe we all have something in common despite being different' began to crop up every so often. Achilles wept over Hector's corpse. Saladin and Richard the Lionheart praised each other and exchanged gifts. Naozane spent his final years praying for the soul of Atsumori, whom he had slain in battle. Uesugi Kenshin wept upon learning of the death of Takeda Shingen, his worthy opponent. They were somewhat like Us.

Meanwhile, the identity of 'Us' has tended to broaden over the years, and the alien 'Them', who don't matter, have tended to be recast as 'rather like Us' and therefore, despite our differences, morally equivalent to Us. We are the city-state, and the rival city-state doesn't matter; We are the nation, and the neighbouring nation doesn't matter; We are male, and females don't matter; We are the light-skinned people, and the dark-skinned people don't matter; and eventually, We are all humans, and the dark-skinned people, and the foreigners, and those with another language, and those with different habits, as it turns out, are like Us, because we all share something in common – and we all matter. Even if in some ways we are incomprehensible to each other, we all matter. Hence, there are treaties, there is international law, and there are widely acknowledged principles of what not to do to other groups, other 'Thems', even if it benefits 'Us'.

In all these historical progressions from a smaller Us to a larger Us, from dismissing Their pain to acknowledging that it was equivalent to Ours even though we were in some ways different, there were some – the pesky philosophers, the ones that thought ahead of their time – who spearheaded the passage to the next level, and others who clung to the previous, narrower conception of who mattered. This was often because the earlier conception was beneficial to them. They often held power and were hesitant to relinquish it; they sometimes belittled, even at times persecuted, the forward-thinkers. But when, eventually, more and more people gravitated towards the counterintuitive new vision of a larger Us, the new vision prevailed, and became the norm, and those early outliers were praised, and their powerful, stubborn opponents were not.

We are witnessing the development of a new, even wider conception of who matters – of whose pain matters, of whose very existence matters, even though they are different from us. This time the dialogue between the new idea and the old idea is more difficult because this time, They are more different from us than any previous Thems. They are the same as Us in that they want to live and they can feel pain and fear; They are different from us in many other ways, and this makes it easier for us to exclude them, and even to condone their killing and still sleep the sleep of the just. As before, the wider conception of who matters is counterintuitive and goes against our self-interest. As before, some tell of the new idea and are often belittled, while others remain mired in the old orthodoxy whereby Their pain doesn't matter as much as Ours not because it is less intense, but simply because They are not Us. We acknowledge that They can feel pain and fear, that They want to live, and at the same time We would never use one of Ourselves as we use one of Them. And because They are not Us, We don't see it as immoral to use Them so.

The thread which runs through all this is the acknowledgement that in spite of Their differences from Us, We cannot a priori subordinate Their interests to Ours just because They are not Us; we all have something in common and there is an equivalence between Their pain and Ours. We cannot condone their torment. We have compassion for them.

Compassion is not, therefore, unthinking, unexamined acceptance of instinct, as opposed to the more advanced mental faculties which 'know better'. There are compassionate instincts, to be sure, and their analysis is one of the more heartening branches of biology; but the recognition of 'Us-ness' in the Other, to the extent of according them equivalence with ourselves even against our own interests – that is something that is advanced both in terms of human psychological development, and in terms of human history. It is neither silly nor primitive. It is difficult to achieve, and it is one of the hallmarks of civilisation.

The language of civility, of 'being nice to each other', has been invoked many a time by advocates of the slaughter decision, who have reiterated the need for civil dialogue when opponents of the killing were held to be insufficiently respectful. But there is something ironic in this. To me, calls of this nature sounded rather like: "It's unfair of you to be nasty to me. Be nice to me by acknowledging my right to be nasty to others". And the feel-good atmosphere that prevailed after we had all agreed, once again, on the need to be civil and respectful sounded to me rather like: "You see? We can all get along peacefully here (except of course for those whom we intend to kill)". I cannot help detecting a certain dubiousness when pleas for civility and kindness are made in the service of an act which is hardly civil or kind, namely, throat-cutting.

And that is what it all boils down to: after all the complicated edifices of words and principles and agricultural data and ethical whirligigs have faced each other, the crucial question is whether Bill and Lou's lives have inherent value, or whether they are instrumental to the interests of a group which excludes them: Us. Because even those who argue in favour of the slaughter acknowledge that a model which included human slavery, no matter how agriculturally efficient, would be unacceptable. In the battle between efficiency and compassion towards those who Matter, compassion wins every time. But one level up – efficiency vs killing non-human sentient beings whose attachment to life is identical to ours – efficiency wins, because they don't Matter.

The problem, though, is that models for resource efficiency have already been proposed which can easily accommodate sparing Bill and Lou. We have compared models, we have evaluated each other's data, and we have discussed this problem extensively; and there seems little doubt that a course of action whereby Bill and Lou can survive is at least – I say, at least – as resource-efficient as one which 'requires' their deaths. It is not a matter of resource efficiency vs Bill and Lou. Both can survive. And it is reasonable to say that between a model with fewer survivors and one with more, the one with more survivors is preferable; the more compassionate model is preferable.

The only thing that stands in the way of this rather unproblematic choice – apart from stubbornness, perhaps – is whether or not to have compassion. It is the question of whether the powers that be, namely GMC, will revert to a 'tried and tested' model of absolute ownership whereby these oxen are means to serve their masters' ends (no matter how comfortingly this is couched in the language of 'honouring' them), or instead take tentative steps in a new, counterintuitive direction by extending compassion to them, because they want to live. We, like Bill and Lou, have no power over this decision; only GMC, despite its claims of being bullied, has the power to spare these lives. It can dig in its heels and snuggle warmly into the old, easy idea of denying compassion to Them. But it can also be one of those pioneers whose early steps towards greater compassion are praised in later years. Between equally compelling alternatives, it has the power to choose the one which allows for the greatest compassion. How civil that would be.

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