Intuitions Gone Astray: between Implausibility and Speciesism

The Predation and Procreation Problems: a Reply

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In his article Stijn Bruers presents an axiology which includes well-being and biodiversity. On his account, however, the latter has much more importance than the former. Tremendous gains in well-being are proscribed when they can only be obtained through a great loss in biodiversity. That is why we should not phase out predation by genetically reprogramming predators. I argue that, even if we value biodiversity, it cannot be that important. This is shown, first, by considering the results of Bruers' account regarding the sacrifice of both nonhuman and human interests. Second, I suggest how rejecting Bruers' view on biodiversity has acceptable implications regarding his two other worries, *r*-selection and the inadvertent killing of sentient invertebrates.

1. Introduction

According to Stijn Bruers there are two things that are to be pursued as ends, rather than as means to further ends. The first of these is well-being. The second is biodiversity, or "[a]ll variation in life forms, entities and processes that are the direct result of natural evolution, where natural evolution is generated by random genetic mutations". There are instances in which one of these ends can only be pursued at the expense of the other. Sometimes, the interests of sentient beings will outweigh the value of biodiversity. Some other times, the value of biodiversity is the one to be promoted, all things considered. Thus, we need an account about the relative strength of these values and the reasons for acting we are to derive from them. Bruers partially tackles these issues in formulating a principle

(the 3-N-principle) about what we have most reason to do across a variety of cases. These include, most importantly, the phenomenon of predation.

If biodiversity is to be valuable as an end (or intrinsically valuable, using Bruers' phrase), then it is possible, in principle, that there are certain kinds of behavior which are so instrumental to the preservation of biodiversity that we *always* have decisive reasons to allow them to happen. The idea is that when one of these behaviors is prevented, the loss in biodiversity is so great that it cannot be compensated for by the gains in well-being, if any, which would obtain (p. 87). Of course, to entail such a strong conclusion, these kinds of behaviors must be specified in such a way as to make it indeed the case that great amounts of value are lost if they are prevented. Bruers performs such specification through the 3-N-principle, which identifies the relevant categories of behaviors as those who are, at the same time, natural, normal and necessary. Suppose that there is some kind of behavior that is the direct result of the blind processes of natural evolution (naturalness) and which is sufficiently widespread among a large group of life forms (normalcy). As Bruers says, this is the kind of behavior that contributes, and tremendously so, to biodiversity. Suppose, moreover, that it is instrumental to the existence of those life forms among which it is widespread (necessity). We can then infer that if such life forms disappear, so will too that kind of behavior and, with it, a great amount of biodiversity value. That is why, according to Bruers, these kinds of behavior are to be allowed, no matter how detrimental to the well-being of the sentient individuals affected by them.

Predators need to feed on other sentient beings for survival. Since predation is a very widespread natural behavior, it is covered by the 3-N-principle. According to Bruers, then, predation, as a *type* of behavior, is morally allowed and we always have decisive reasons not to prevent it. I believe, however, that he is misguided. Bruers raises many issues in his article. Here, however, I can only focus but on a few of them. First, I will argue that even if we value biodiversity as Bruers does, we should not endorse his 3-N-principle. Finally, I will show how we can provide plausible answers to his worries about *r*-selection and bodily motion. The upshot of this is that predation is an undesirable phenomenon which we have very strong reasons to phase out.

2. The 3-N-principle and the relative weight of well-being

The 3-N-principle is a hypothesis on the result of our balance of reasons when our reasons to promote well-being and our reasons to preserve biodiversity conflict. Regarding predation, it suggests that the loss in biodiversity value caused by phasing out predators cannot be outweighed by the gain in well-being which would result. However, that is not so.

Consider a planet in which life has been evolving for billions of years, producing rich and complex ecosystems. These are inhabited by innumerable sentient beings, who are constantly beset by a series of natural harms, including predation. Eventually, some of them evolve complex cognitive capacities and, over time, develop a process to genetically reprogram predators into herbivores. That would amount to a variation in a life form achieved through artificial means, that is, by a "conscious, reflective, non-instinctive invention" (p. 87). Thus, a whole pattern of natural behavior would have been eliminated, not through substitution by another natural behavior, equally valuable in terms of biodiversity, but by an artificial one, valueless in that respect. Certainly, on Bruers' definition of biodiversity, much value would be lost in the process of reprogramming predators. Yet much suffering would be prevented as well. The 3-N-principle asks us to assess, on the one hand, the overall improvement in net well-being produced by the fact that present and future animals will no longer be preyed upon. It also asks us, on the other hand, to assess the loss in biodiversity produced by the disappearance of the various instances of predation that would otherwise obtain. Finally, it tells us that the latter is too great to be compensated by the former. But how can that be so?

If indeed the value of biodiversity obtains with any variation "in life forms, entities and processes that are the direct result of natural evolution" it seems, first, that it has no negative scale. Losses in biodiversity never reduce it below zero, but are restricted to movements along a positive scale. Second, this means that it is ever increasing and that, with the passage of time, any past loss in biodiversity can be compensated by future variations. That is to say that, even if after phasing out predation the biodiversity value of the planet at t_1 is less than it would have been if predation continued to exist, such value may at t_2 be as high due to the cumulative effect of variations in life forms over time.

It can be objected that the biodiversity value of the world at t_2 is nevertheless lower than the value it would have had at that time if predation persisted, assuming all other variations would have also taken place. This is possible, but on Bruers account, biodiversity must always be pitted against

well-being. Unlike biodiversity, well-being *does* possess a negative scale. It is fair to assume that most nonhuman animals living in the wild lead lives of net negative well-being. The mere phasing out of predation is probably not enough to ensure that these nonhuman individuals would enjoy lives at the positive side of the scale. Yet that can be ensured if we combine the phasing out of predation with other interventions in nature which Bruers considers unproblematic. Indeed, he seems to consider morally permissible to nourish animals that live in the wild and control their populations through contraceptive methods (p. 87, n. 1). But if contraception is permissible, then vaccination and similar methods for preventing and healing diseases must be as well. Hundreds of billions of animals live in the wild. Thus, even on Bruers' account, it is possible to prevent the overwhelming majority of sentient beings from living lives of net negative well-being by paying the price of the loss in biodiversity produced by reprogramming predators.

We are assuming, in following Bruers, that the value of an outcome is a compound of its biodiversity value, which is always positive, and its well-being value, which might be either or positive or negative. In these cases, we are contemplating the possibility of vastly reducing its negative well-being value by eliminating a part of its positive biodiversity value. On these terms, it is highly implausible to say that we have decisive reasons not to phase out predation. But, if so, then the 3-N-principle fails as a hypothesis about our balance of reasons.

A possible way out is to claim that the importance of well-being, even negative well-being, is relatively low, when compared to biodiversity. Thus, we can imagine a spectrum of cases in which, at one end, we find the loss of value produced by the disappearance of predation, which is greater than the foreseeable increase in net well-being. At the other end of the spectrum, we find the negligible losses produced by preventing isolated instances of predation. It is implicit in Bruers' treatment of these cases (p. 87, n. 1) that these losses actually can be compensated by gains in well-being, since he admits that we are permitted to intervene to save particular prey.

Let us now imagine a case in the middle of the spectrum. Consider an ecosystem on Earth in which, after a period of natural disasters, all predator species except one have become extinct. A severe drought follows, killing most of the herbivores on which these predators fed. We can foresee that, after a while, all predators will die of starvation. Suddenly, a herd of a new herbivore species migrates into the ecosystem. There are enough of them to feed the predators for the time they need until the local prey recover their numbers. On the other hand, we are in the possession of the necessary technology to reprogram predators into herbivores, thus preventing both their death and the death of their prospective prey. Undoubt-

edly, on the 3-N-principle, what we have most reason to do is to allow the predators to kill the new species, so that they can continue to exist in the future.

But consider now a variation of that case. Suppose that instead of a new migrating herbivore species, it is a previously unknown tribe of human beings who reach the ecosystem, fleeing from a severe famine. On Bruers' account, each of these human beings has the moral permission to defend herself from the predators. As observers, though, we can tell with a high degree of probability that because they are weak and unprepared, they will all die. We can, however, easily reprogram the predators. What ought we to do?

It would be highly implausible to say that, in this case, we have decisive reasons not to reprogram the predators. That might cause some loss in biodiversity, but it also preserves the lives the tribe of human beings, without thereby causing the predators death by starvation. Actually, it is arguable that in this case we have decisive reasons to help the humans by reprogramming the predators. If that is so, consistency requires us to provide a similar answer in cases where the victims are nonhuman animals instead of humans. If, as Bruers himself recognizes, mere reference to species is arbitrary, we cannot explain our different treatment of these cases by pointing to the different species to which the prospective prey belong. When reflecting in an unbiased way focusing on cases in which the victims are human beings, we clearly see how well-being cannot have such little importance when compared to biodiversity. Because we must reject speciesism, that cannot be the case either when nonhuman well-being is at stake.

Let us return to the first imaginary case and consider the entire phasing out of predation. We can now suppose that all present and future lives of net negative well-being that we could prevent by phasing out predation (combined with the other morally unproblematic interventions) are human, rather than nonhuman. That would be a much better world than the one in which hundreds of billions of humans lead miserable lives. But then, so would be the world in which these lives belong to nonhuman individuals.

Hence, even if biodiversity matters, it cannot matter as much as the 3-N-principle implies. It tells us that the prevention of unfathomable amounts of net negative well-being is not worth the loss of the phenomenon of predation. On Bruers' axiology, biodiversity simply counts too much, and the well-being of sentient individuals too little. That is plainly seen when considering its implications for human well-being. Rejecting speciesism forces us to take as seriously the well-being of nonhumans, who are the ones who suffer predation. We do have decisive reasons to phase predation out.

3. The issues of r-selection and bodily motion

One of the virtues Bruers attaches to his 3-N-principle is its ability to explain as well his intuitions in favor of bodily motion and *r*-selection. When we move around, we kill insects (or sentient invertebrates, more generally), yet it does not seem to him that moving is morally impermissible. Most animals are *r*-selected, which causes a tremendous amount of suffering and death, yet it does not seem to him that we should eliminate this reproductive strategy. We do not need, however, the 3-N-principle in order to provide plausible answers to the issues raised by these two phenomena.

The issue of *r*-selection should not be worrisome once we perceive that well-being cannot be as unimportant, when compared to biodiversity, as Bruers claims. As he admits, the existence of *r*-selection causes billions of animals to be born only to die shortly thereafter, leading brief lives of net negative well-being. If we had the means to prevent that from happening without thereby causing more harm, we would surely have decisive reasons to do so. That is what follows form the considerations I made in the previous section, even taking into account the loss in biodiversity that would ensue.

Regarding bodily motion, we risk dismissing the possibility that there might be something objectionable with killing sentient invertebrates out of sheer prejudice. Because of their small size and their lack of cuteness it is harder for us to intuitively consider them as beings with interests which must be taken into consideration. If one worries that her treatment of these cases is biased in this way, one can try to counter the prejudice by imagining that we are discussing small, cute, furry rodents which we may inadvertently kill.

All our activities have harmful effects, either seen or unforeseen. If, nevertheless, we can reasonably expect their positive value to outweigh the harm they might cause, we are justified in pursuing them. This is the case, for example, of activities which involve benefiting the worse-off, like nonhuman animals. Of course, we must think of less harmful alternatives to achieve the same valuable results or of ways in which we might alleviate the negative consequences of our decisions that befall on other sentient individuals.

Invertebrates have interests, and we ought to take those interests into account in our decisions. If we are pursuing an activity with sufficiently expectable good effects and we are aware that we might unintentionally kill invertebrates what we must do is the same as if victims were cute rodents. We must avoid recklessness and be attentive, preventing as much harm as we can.

4. Conclusion

In an axiology that includes both well-being and biodiversity, the latter cannot have as much importance when compared to the former as the 3-N-principle implies. First, denying so does not have counterintuitive results regarding either *r*-selection or bodily motion. Second, it forces us to either embrace highly implausible implications regarding the sacrifice of human well-being, or accept them with respect to nonhuman interests, but not with human ones – thereby incurring into speciesism.

Neither horn of the dilemma is admissible. The only admissible way out is amending the original theory, denying that biodiversity has such importance. Phasing out predation (in combination with other interventions) would greatly improve the lives of hundreds of billions of nonhuman animals. Even if we value biodiversity, that is the kind of world we have decisive reasons to bring about.