

*Rights, Killing, and Suffering: Moral Vegetarianism and Applied Ethics*, by R. G. Frey. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983, xii + 256 pp. Price £17.50.

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“Books are not absolutely dead things”, Milton said. But some are, and Frey’s is shown to be so by the life on its dustjacket. Someone at Blackwell’s or their design firm had the bright idea of using a detail of Paulus Potter’s *The Young Bull* on the cover of Frey’s book, not realising that the painting’s depth would show up what lay between the covers. The detail, beautifully reproduced, shows a peasant separated from his beasts — the bull, a cow, three sheep —

by a fence and by a large cross formed by two trees, on which he leans, gazing at the bull. He is with them but apart from them; he shares, but with a difference, their life. Man and beasts are rendered with magnificent realism, realism reaching to the flies on the cow and a toad right at the front. What is in the picture is Potter’s sense of the mysteriousness of the life we share; it is an impressive meditation on what *dominion* means, on what it is for human life to be dependent in the ways it was then on that of animals.

Frey’s is the book of a blind man. I do not mean that the particular views he takes on the moral issues he discusses are wrong or stupid. Rather, what he makes of *taking a view on a moral issue* is itself altogether shallow. He has no notion of moral life except as the taking up of views pro and con doing things, views which may or may not interfere with what one likes doing. That a moral view has its roots in a human soul he does not see, nor why it matters how far down those roots go. His Hero — someone whom he imagines fending off, or trying to, the arguments of Peter Singer aimed at turning us all into vegetarians — is a twerp called “the concerned individual”, full of a busy-ness of arguments and a busy-ness of movements ameliorating things. Life, the life on the cover of the book, passes him by.

Judging by all the standards I can think of (except splendour of dustjacket) Frey's book is very poor indeed. I found myself wondering how Blackwell's had come to publish it. For one thing, it is not properly a book at all. What Frey has to say about "moral vegetarianism", supposedly the main topic of the book, comes to very little. Virtually all of that is criticism of Peter Singer's arguments. Since Frey shares Singer's utilitarianism the criticisms do not go very deep. A reader will find the discussion of Singer extremely laboured and almost unbelievably repetitious. There are, for example, two chapters devoted to going round and round and over and over a point made neatly by John Benson in nine lines in his review of Singer (*Philosophy* 53, No. 206 (October 1978), p. 531). A fifth of the book is given over to the development of a utilitarian account of rights. There are criticisms of McCloskey, Mackie, Dworkin and Hare: journal-article stuff with only a tenuous connection to the theme of the book. Another lengthy digression of the same sort is on the doctrine of double effect. Here the connection with the supposed subject of the book is even harder to find. Some anti-utilitarian views on the value of life *are* linked to the doctrine of double effect; some of those who argue against killing animals take anti-utilitarian views on the value of life; but if Frey thinks that makes a connection he needs a course in logic. Another indication that Frey had no book is that he had no clear audience in mind. He devotes three chapters to making clear *what* problems he wants to focus on, a matter he could have explained in a couple of sentences if he were taking for granted an audience with some, even minimal, familiarity with philosophy. But he has abandoned his non-philosophical audience entirely in the later sections of the book, thus reinforcing the impression that the initial chapters were mere padding.

The book is badly written; the badness of the writing is linked to the shallowness of the thought, as, for example, in this passage:

And this remains true, I want to emphasize, even if my position on food animals — that none is self-conscious — is wrong, and Singer's — that some are self-conscious — is right, so long as the animals held to escape replaceability include the concessions which Singer is, and in my examples here, I think, must be prepared to make. With this the case, the meat-eater will be able to work the replaceability argument over a sufficiently large number of animals to preserve his diet more or less intact.

The insensitivity of the language and the crudeness of the idea of moral thought, of what it is like and what it is *for*, cannot be separated. There are infelicities of style, vulgarities of thought and grammatical errors throughout the book. Frey does not know what “purvey”, “amenable”, “fiat”, “vis-à-vis” mean; someone at Blackwell’s should have noticed. There are misspellings on pages 8, 43, 82, 90, 92, 152, 198 (a defender of meat-eating should be able to spell *McDonald’s!*), 202, 217, 220, 226, 232. I noticed inaccurate references on pages 138 and 140, and typographical errors on pages 8, 22, 24, 46, 50, 52, 60, 63, 78, 81, 84, 86, 105, 106, 119, 132, 137, 142, 145, 161, 169, 180, 194, 202, 205, 206, 212, 214, 224, 245 and 252.

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