

Broadie and Pybus on Kant

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In their essay 'Kant's Treatment of Animals' (*Philosophy*, 49 (1974), 375–383), Alexander Broadie and Elizabeth M. Pybus argue both that (1) Kant's account of our duties to animals is "radically at odds with a sound ordinary view concerning our treatment of animals, namely, the view that animals, in so far as they have a capacity for suffering, are objects of direct moral concern" (p. 345) and that (2) Kant's view concerning our duties to animals leads to absurdity and is internally inconsistent with other principles in his philosophy. The former of these charges may be correct, but not the latter, at least not for the reasons Broadie and Pybus give.

Their reasons are as follows (p. 382):

[Kant's] argument, put briefly, is to the effect that if human beings maltreat animals they will acquire a tendency to use rationality (in themselves or in other people) as a means. But, according to Kant, animals are, in the technical sense, things, and consequently are precisely what we should use as means. His argument therefore is that if we use certain things, viz. animals, as means, we will be led to use human beings as means.

Something has gone wrong already. Kant never maintains that it is wrong to use animals as *means*—e.g. as beasts of burden. What he does maintain is that the *maltreatment* of animals is wrong because it leads those who do so to treat persons in a similar way. And it is clear that Kant does not suppose, as, in the passage just quoted, Broadie and Pybus erroneously assume that he does, that the concept of maltreating an animal, on the one hand, and, on the other, the concept of using an animal as a means, are the same or logically equivalent concepts. For we can, given Kant's views, use an animal as a means without at the same time necessarily maltreating it, as when, for example, a blind man uses a seeing eye dog but treats him with love and devotion.

This same error underlies the charge of absurdity and inconsistency that the authors level against Kant in bringing their argument to a head. They write (p. 383):

Thus, if [Kant] is to use the argument that using animals as *means* will lead us to use rationality as means, he must generalize it, and say that because of the effect on our behaviour towards other people, we ought never to use anything as a means, and we have an indirect duty not to do so. This is not merely absurd, but contrary to his imperative of skill (my italics).

Discussion

The point is, however, that Kant does *not* maintain that using animals as *means* will lead to the effects in question; what he does maintain is that *maltreating* them will. So Broadie and Pybus cannot argue that Kant's position leads to the absurd consequence that we have an indirect duty not to use any thing as a means on the ground that Kant holds that we have an indirect duty not to use animals in this way. Nor can they say that his view here is inconsistent with his imperative of skill. For what follows from what Kant says is not that we have an indirect duty not to use any thing as a means; what follows is that we have an indirect duty not to *maltreat* any thing, if, by doing so, we are led to use the rationality in ourselves or in others merely as a means. Even assuming, then, that Kant's views here are 'radically at odds with a sound ordinary view concerning our treatment of animals', Broadie and Pybus have not shown that they are absurd or that they are radically at odds with his own views on other matters.

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