

Tom Regan: An Appreciation

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If my earlier, student self could have anticipated that he would later be invited to write an appreciation for a volume of essays dedicated to Tom Regan, that earlier Jeff McMahan would have regarded this as the highest honor to which he might aspire. Regan was among my earliest philosophical heroes, along with Bertrand Russell, Jonathan Glover, and Peter Singer. Throughout his career, Regan has combined the two characteristics that I most admire in a philosopher: first, the ability, frequently exercised, to think deeply, rigorously, and dispassionately about issues that really matter, and second, the passionate determination to make a difference to the way those issues are addressed outside the world of academic philosophy. The example that Regan has set has been an inspiration to me in all that I have subsequently done in my own philosophical work.

But he did more than inspire me from afar. He encouraged and helped me as well, even though I was a complete stranger with no claim to his attention. I do not recall the origin of my personal acquaintance with him but I am reasonably confident that it must have begun with a letter I would have sent while I was writing a thesis on the moral status of animals during the final year of my work toward a BA in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics at Oxford. For during that year and continuing afterward, Regan wrote me friendly and philosophically instructive letters, sent me photocopies of his published and unpublished writings (at a time when there were no personal computers and thus no email, so that sending documents overseas was a much more onerous and expensive enterprise than it is now), and even welcomed me into his home on those occasions when I was in North Carolina visiting my wife's family. He was the personification of kindness and generosity.

I was therefore surprised to learn, years later when I was an untenured professor at the University of Illinois, that he was a terrorist. That, at any rate, is what was claimed by numerous professors, heads of departments, directors of schools, and deans of colleges at that university. A fledgling Program for the Study of Cultural Values and Ethics had decided to have an inaugural conference on the theme of "ethical challenges to the university," at which one of the topics was to be challenges to the use of animals for experimental and pedagogical purposes. The organizers had decided to invite Regan and his well-known sparring partner, Ray Frey, to have a public debate on those issues followed by questions and comments from the audience. This was to be one of the centerpiece events that required special funding and publicity. The organizers were therefore obliged to seek sponsorship and financial support from various potentially interested departments and units throughout the university. While the organizers' appeals for support prompted collegial offers of support from some quarters, they also ignited a barrage of protests by members of departments involved in animal experimentation. Many of these people worked strenuously to block funding for Regan's visit, while naturally proclaiming in sanctimonious terms their devotion to academic freedom and free speech.

As a member of the philosophy department who worked in ethics, I was approached by the organizers of the conference with a request to compose a short statement testifying to Regan's stature and credibility as a philosopher, to be circulated in defense of the invitation. This I was happy to do. I had read and carefully studied his work, including his magnum opus, *The Case for Animal Rights*, for many years. I also had Robert Nozick's testimony, in a review of that book in the *New York Review of Books*, that Regan "does not, to my knowledge, fit the mold of crank." That was of course highly reassuring, though it would have been even more helpful if Nozick had affirmed that, to his knowledge, Regan did not fit the mold of terrorist. I am sure I quoted passage, along with the further judgment of this member of the Harvard pantheon that the book was "careful, sophisticated...lucid, closely reasoned and dispassionate..."

But despite this appeal to authority, and my efforts to explain why Regan's arguments were thoughtful, reasonable, and in the best traditions of Western philosophy, the consequences of the distribution of my statement were unpleasant. I received, over the new medium of email, a number of vituperative and accusatory messages from senior faculty, some suggesting that my presence at the university was unwelcome. Most of the writers were eminent in their fields, but to the extent that they were able to rise above mere abuse, their claims were mendacious and their characterizations of Regan's positions and arguments would have embarrassed an undergraduate. One highly distinguished neuroscientist in the psychology department responded to my statement about Regan by claiming that "to portray Regan as a 'deep and articulate thinker' free of 'largely emotional appeals' is roughly equivalent to calling Hermann Goering an expert on Jewish cultural values." Another eminent member of the psychology faculty described Regan's work as "a rather tendentious and ill-informed collection of arguments-by-assertion buried in hand-waving, breast-beating, and self-advertising prose." This extraordinary mischaracterization of the work makes it virtually certain that this man had never read a word that Regan had written. Yet this same man also asserted that Regan "inflames his audiences, and drives his followers to covert actions which threaten our colleagues, not by esoteric meandering regarding inherent rights [presumably the appropriate occupation of a moral philosopher] but rather by conscious demagoguery anchored in lies."

I learned a great deal from this episode about how irrational, mean-spirited, and dishonest even highly distinguished academics can become when it is suggested that there are moral objections to something they do. Regan's careful and unpolemical arguments, had his critics actually read them, could not have dented their mental armor. In the end, Regan and Frey were able to appear and to have a tame and amicable debate before a large, engaged, but thoroughly unagitated and uninflamed audience. None of the dire predictions of raids on laboratories, attacks on researchers, and the collapse of civilization were fulfilled.

Instead, together with the efforts of many others dedicated to peacefully ending practices involving the wrongful exploitation of animals, Regan's philosophical work and political activism have led to many incremental and continuing reductions in the barbarity with which we use animals. There can be no doubt

that his efforts have made significant contributions to the alteration of the ways in which people think about animals, the engagement of the law on behalf of animals, and the enactment of legislation in many countries that regulates the ways in which animals are reared, transported, and used for experimental and other purposes. For the same reasons that his detractors should be ashamed, Tom Regan has much to be proud of.