

“Animal rights: an IQ debate” Radio National.

AGAINST: Catherine Marriott—chief executive of the Kimberley and Pilbara Cattlemen's association

'Can you imagine not knowing where your next meal is coming from? Your baby is crying because he's hungry, but you've got a buffalo that you can potentially give milk to your baby from. This is the daily ritual ... in many developing nations around the world.

'Animals in developing nations actually serve a purpose as a bank, which enables them to use that money when they sell that animal to educate their children, which leads to bringing families, and eventually nations, out of poverty.

'We have two billion people worldwide living below the poverty line and there's much research that shows that eating meat in small amounts will start to develop the brain. Sitting here in Australia with our full gut and our wet throat, are we willing to say that we're more important because we've made it?'

This was the “highlight” of Catherine Marriott's position in a recent Radio National debate on the rights of animals. While I thought the entire debate was of poor standard, nonetheless, I don't think this instance of appallingly bad reasoning should be allowed to stand.

The first premise seems to be that unless we allow people in developing nations to “milk buffalo” their children will die of starvation, that the only way of saving these children from hunger is the “daily ritual” of milking buffalo.

It is a very curious argument for the representative of the Cattlemen's Association to advance, given that the association is only interested in eating the buffalo not milking it. Of course, the example is meant to be emotive, the hunger of a child on the one hand as opposed to the innocuous (for most Australians) milking on the other. Although the fact that it does occur does not of course show that it should, even so, we are presumably meant to agree that this is a legitimate use of an animal. Legitimate use of course does not show that animals have no rights.

As it happens I have no problem with peasants in the developing world milking buffalo, if they can find a buffalo that will allow itself to be milked. But this is not really what Marriott is actually saying. The implied intention is that animal milk is the only way, “your baby” can survive. This of course is false. The most numerous population on earth (China) doesn't typically feed dairy milk, whether cow or buffalo or goat to their infants; at least it did not until very recently and only now as the result of “marketing”. The hope however, is that you, the audience, will put yourselves in the shoes of the poor suffering third world parent, and accept a relatively innocuous premise as a way of leading you accept the next.

The next premise is many times worse. Here we have a foreshortened argument that once again seeks to establish what appears to be an innocuous claim only to then link it illegitimately with a ambiguous and ultimately false proposition. According to Harriott, those poor suffering people in the developing world sell their animals to educate their children. This is descriptive, and one certainly doesn't need to be in a developing country for this to be an accurate description of farming families. Again, it tells us nothing about the normative acceptability of the practice but it does associate 'selling animals'; the

proposition she is trying to justify; with 'education', a concept that, by and large, has warm positive connotations, certainly for the audience of this event. So, we are invited to accept that selling animals for the sake of educating your children is an acceptable use of animals. The word "selling" is delightfully neutral, even so, this might also be considered an innocuous claim that we might agree to. However, her further claim, the conclusion of her sub-argument: "which leads to bringing families, and eventually nations, out of poverty": should simply be rejected. Our first question should be, what is it that "leads to bringing families, and eventually nations, out of poverty"? Does she mean education eventually leads to the eradication of poverty for nations and families? This one is tempting and almost certainly the meaning most of her audience had in mind when they implicitly accepted her argument. It is however, and unfortunately, false. The population of the USSR, before its fall, had high literacy rates but the economic reality was the both population and nation were poor. Literacy doesn't straight-forwardly lead to the path out of poverty as many taxi drivers can attest. But, even if we were to accept that education and the eradication of poverty are linked in some way, it does not follow that using animals as banks and selling them is linked to poverty eradication. This is the conclusion Harriott is attempting to foist on the audience. Simply, there is no necessary nor sufficient condition that leads from using animals as banks to the eradication of poverty.

Those interested in such things will note that this is a fallacy of formal reasoning known as affirming the consequent. If P , then Q . Q . Therefore, P . Simply, any number of things may assist in the eradication of poverty, selling animals to educate children is merely one possible way and not one we must inevitably agree to. Still not convinced. If people grow opium poppies they will be able to sell those poppies and pay for the education of their children, education leads to reduction of poverty, therefore people should grow opium poppies to educate their children. Growing opium poppies is essential to the reduction of poverty! Somehow I don't see the Cattlemen's Association leaping to this conclusion. The argument form is invalid.

The final kicker however, is Catherine Marriott's claim: We have two billion people worldwide living below the poverty line and there's much research that shows that eating meat in small amounts will start to develop the brain. Sitting here in Australia with our full gut and our wet throat, are we willing to say that we're more important because we've made it?

Having softened the audience up with various (non-fatal) animal use = education = eradication of poverty claims, Marriott attempts to now to link intelligence and eating meat. It seems such a small step, no? It was at this point I choked on my Weeties. Perhaps Marriot would care to raise her eyesight just a little higher to the subcontinent of India. India with its 1.5 billion people 80% of whom don't eat meat and living in a culture that hasn't done so for about 5000 years. Is she really saying that the India is poor because its population doesn't eat meat? That the population of India lacks intelligence because it doesn't eat meat and its lack of intelligence explains its poverty? Has anyone told India this?

I presume that Marriott's link here is to the unsupported claim that human intelligence is the evolutionary product of meat eating. Even if this were the case, and there is no evidence of any kind that it is, this could not possibly justify the claim that we now need to eat meat in order to eradicate poverty. In terms of evolutionary development, human physiology is adapted to lives that are relatively short; forty years or so. After that things begin to wear out. But it is hardly likely that any would support the view that we need to start culling people after forty. What may or may not have been the

case in our evolutionary past has no bearing on what we should be doing now.

We should conclude that Marriott's argument, and therefore the position of the Cattlemen's Association is utterly fallacious and should be rejected. Her reasoning is invalid, her premises false or ambiguous. Her conclusions absurd. Her language and examples are emotive and deliberately directed at the emotional manipulation of her audience. In actuality, her entire discussion was an attempt at distraction. She has in fact begged the question entirely.

Unfortunately, the lack of quality in this debate is a sad testament to the low standards of public discourse in Australia more generally.