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6-1993

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Recommended Citation

Spira, H. (1993, June). Towards a boundless ethic. Fellowship: 30-31.

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Towards A Boundless Ethic

Henry Spira

"In their behavior toward creatures, all men were Nazis. The smugness with which man could do with other species as pleased exemplified the most extreme racist theories, the principle that might is right." -- Isaac Bashevis Singer

Today we have particularly good reason to be concerned with the violence humans inflict on humans. But should those of us who care about the violence inflicted on men, women and children care about the violence inflicted on animals? In my own mind, the need for a consistent ethic of nonviolence for both human and non-human animals is obvious--one is an extension of the other.

When thinking of violence to animals many people may just conjure up a gun-toting trophy hunter or a sadistic psychopath torturing a dog. Yet to limit one's vision to these dramatic but occasional acts of violence is to miss the point. The real, massive violence is part of the structure of our culture--animals are considered lab tools and edibles. Every year, tens of millions of animals suffer in lab prisons and more than six billion farm animals suffer violence on their way to the dinner table.

This violence is mostly invisible, has society's seal of approval and is rationalized by a culture with an appetite, if not outright addiction, for the taste of flesh.

The simple fact that we eat animals dominates our attitude towards them. And society does not want to be uncomfortable with the injustices woven into its fabric and therefore attempts to create an unbridgeable gap between ourselves and other animal species.

Society promotes the concept that we must dominate other animals. It is a philosophy of competition rather than interdependence; a defense of exploitation rather than a desire to live in harmony with the rest of nature. Tradition also promotes the anthropocentric view that humans are defined by their differences from, rather than their similarities with, other animals.

A few centuries ago, most intellectuals believed that animals were automatons incapable of feeling pain as humans experience it. They used this reasoning to justify the cruelest experiments, ignoring the screams of their victims. As writer Isaac Bashevis Singer observed, "Various philosophers and religious leaders tried to convince their disciples and followers that animals are nothing more than machines without a soul, without feelings. However, anyone who has ever lived with an animal--be it a dog, a bird or even a mouse--knows that this theory is a brazen lie, invented to justify cruelty."

Today, familiarity with Charles Darwin, common sense and recent studies of animal awareness all suggest that we are not separated by an unbridgeable gulf. There is an overlap of mental abilities, capacity for rational thought, an ability to communicate and concern for others. There are shared feelings. And, like us, other animals want to get a little pleasure out of life.

As far back as 1789, the British utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham summed it all up: "The question is not, Can they *reason*? nor Can they *talk*, but, Can they *suffer*?" And when it comes to suffering, what

relevant difference is there between us and other animals? What gives us the right to violate the bodies and minds of other feeling beings? Unless we subscribe to the tenet of tyranny, that might makes right, there is no way to justify our harming other species.

Animal Rights Crusade authors James M. Jasper and Dorothy Nelkin suggest that this "powerful social movement [is] driven by a simple moral position: animals are similar enough to humans to deserve serious moral consideration. They are sentient beings, entitled to dignified lives, and they should be treated as ends, not as means. Protesters ask how we can love our pets, yet experiment on identical animals in laboratories; how we can cuddle one animal yet eat another."

The reason we are able to cuddle one animal while acquiescing to violence against billions of other animals is that, without any effort, we can distance ourselves from the violence.

If animals were vivisected and slaughtered in the city square behind glass walls, we would doubtless be outraged and begin to change our eating habits and research priorities. The same would be true if we had to kill the animals we eat.

But the violence inflicted against animals takes place behind closed doors, so that meat eaters are spared the screams of their dinner, so they don't have to look their ham and steaks in the eye. And lab animals are kept out of sight, imprisoned behind steel gates as they are driven insane, burned, radiated, starved, blinded, bashed, poisoned and electro-shocked.

The pig, the veal calf, the chicken are violated without respite throughout their entire existence. Stress and insanity are a standard part of the man-made hell called factory farming. There is no escape and there are no survivors. Meat is murder and there is no crime hotline, no help for the battered victims.

The baby calf is separated from his mother at birth to be boarded up in crates so narrow he can't even turn around. That the veal calf stays alive for his allotted sixteen weeks is a tribute to the drugs pumped into him. When taken to slaughter, he is often so ill and weak that he must be dragged along the floor.

In vast egg laying factories, hens live out their lives in a space smaller than this page, so immobilized that their feet grow around the wire mesh floor of their cages.

If we did to companion animals what is done to dinner animals, they'd lock us up and show it on the 6 o'clock news. The perpetrator would be called a psychopath, mentally disturbed. Yet the pain of a dog, cat, pig, calf, chicken is the same. We are shocked by violence against infants and the elderly because they are defenseless. Non-human animals are in that same vulnerable class.

In the epilogue for *In Defense of Animals*, philosopher Peter Singer contests the notion that only humans matter: "(Some claim that) our own species must come first. But why should we accept this claim? Only 200 years ago, it might have seemed just as contrary to human nature for us to take great care for the interests of other races. When I see myself as one among others, the relevant point of the comparison is that others also have feelings, others can also suffer or be happy. Any being capable of feeling anything, whether pain or pleasure or any kind of positive or negative state of consciousness, must therefore count."

We cannot be selective about whom we defend from being dominated, experimented upon, confined or butchered for dinner. As British writer Brigid Brophy notes, "the exploitation of the other animal species by the human animal species is the most unscrupulous, the most cruel, the most nearly universal and the longest-lasting exploitation of one class by another class in the history of the world. And the pattern of

mental blind spots that allows us to do it is a pattern very easily adaptable to any other of the (fashionable) tyrannies."

Still, some argue that there's a limit to our compassion, that we can only relate to a limited amount of violence. But compassion is never limiting. On the contrary, compassion feeds on itself the more we practice it in our lives, the more of it we have to use. Conversely, the more we accept violence, the more inured we become to it.

Countering violence to animals is an issue close to home, as are the solutions. Eating with conscience, shifting to a meatless or less meat-dependent diet is not only a powerful weapon in the war against violence, it is an easy passive step, a move which can make all the difference for animals while improving our own well-being.

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