A SPIRITUAL APPROACH TO THE QUESTION OF LEATHER

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Leather is the hide or skin of animals killed (partly) for the purpose of producing shoes, boots, pocketbooks, wallets, belts, and countless other products. Those concerned with animal rights at some point encounter this reality: sentient creatures are slaughtered and skinned--their hides processed by the leather industry--in order to sell people these leather goods.

RELIGION

Jim Harter, Animals: 1973
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New York: Dover, 1970

The use of leather (as well as of fur) is an issue that needs to be faced by those animal rights advocates who, perhaps, may not already have done so. It is an issue that can be approached from a moral, utilitarian, economic, or aesthetic point of view. However, I am leaving these perspectives--each of them important and compelling--to others. Instead, I propose to approach the question of using leather from a spiritual point of view, which, I believe, underlies and is presupposed by the others.[1]

How does one approach the issue of leather (or fur) from a spiritual vantagepoint? Well, first of all, it is important to understand what is meant by the word "spiritual." I use this word to mean the recognition of and commitment to the fundamental unity of self, other, and world.

However, by "spiritual" I do not mean simply "togetherness." In perceiving that "you are the world," to use Krishnamurti's eloquent phrase,[2] the spiritually-minded individual lives, calls forth, the sacredness of being-one-with-life. Living spiritually means evoking a world that is sacred; this is what Albert Schweitzer meant in creating an ethic founded upon "reverence for life."

So, a spiritual approach to the question of leather is fundamentally a recognition of and a commitment to facing the sacred spirit of the animal whose life was destroyed in order to obtain its hide or skin. The role of sacrifice in relation to the sacred cannot be over-emphasized. Indeed, sacred, sacrifice, sanctity are terms that are inextricably connected. They all refer to the holy, and while in particular, sacrifice has classically meant the sacred offering to the deity of something precious, we shall question the meaning of sacrifice when the last traces of the divine have all but disappeared. In short, what is the meaning of animal slaughter or "sacrifice" in the absence of a connection with the divine?

Possession and Desire

Let us say that as a supporter of animal rights I perceive an inconsistency between my concern for the welfare of animals and the use of leather (or fur). The perceived inconsistency may have originated in a nagging doubt or uneasiness, perhaps even an awkwardness when in the company of ardent vegetarians or non-sympathetic hunters. But however

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it began, there the inconsistency is.

So what to do?

The leather boots, shoes, wallets, and belts were bought prior to the realization or awakening. Some of these leather goods may even have been presented as gifts by beloved family or friends. It would be unfair to hold the owner of these leather goods accountable for purchases or gifts that pre-date an awareness of the relationship between leather and animal suffering.

But now one has the problem of dealing with these leather possessions with integrity. "Integrity" here means bridging the gap between an animal rights perspective and an animal rights practice.

Again, how is this to be done? Well, if consistency is uppermost in one's mind, the individual may choose to give up his/her leather possessions. The animal rights advocate simply eliminates the leather, which is the evidence of animal suffering and exploitation, from his/her life. Depending on how compelling consistency is, the task of rounding up every shoe, belt, boot, wallet, and pocketbook will be easy or difficult. Once all these formerly cherished leather possessions are packed neatly into a carton (or two or three), they can be disposed of in any number of ways. They can be distributed among friends and family for whom animal suffering does not arouse any pangs of conscience. Alternatively, the leather goods can be donated to charity, given to the anonymous poor and needy who may be grateful for these sturdy and durable articles of clothing obtained through the parallel (but typically unnoted) suffering of countless animals.

A third possibility would be to bury the leather possessions as an act of respect and mourning for the animals whose lives were sacrificed. Burying the leather can be a radical gesture, one which may evoke criticism if not outright hostility from others--these reactions perhaps stemming in many instances from a fear of the unusual or unknown or from guilt. The extent to which ritual is employed in the burial will depend on the individual.

Not all of the possibilities for action have been exhausted yet. One more still remains. It is possible to continue wearing the leather goods that one possesses. An

individual might hold the conviction that wearing the leather was the most fitting expression of respect for the spirit of the animal who suffered and died.[3]

Those who choose this last form of action would be vulnerable to a charge of inconsistency. They could easily be accused of conveying a double message to other, less enlightened people who might misinterpret their use of leather as an acceptance of and support for the killing of animals for their hides.

The charge of inconsistency is most often made by those who have difficulty tolerating ambiguity and ambivalence. A preoccupation with consistency also reflects a hankering for general or absolute rules to which all must comply. Compliance with absolutes creates a uniformity, a conformity, which is designed to banish the suffering and isolation caused by inner conflict or uncertainty. However, compliance and conformity, like consistency, are won at a great price--the price of individual integrity. Outer consistency leads to inner loss; one loses him/herself in the process of glossing over doubts, uncertainties, and inconsistencies.

It was necessary to discuss the psychological implications of a relatively forced consistency in order to make the following key point about the question of leather: the spiritual path is pathless. There are no prefabricated answers. The resolution of the question from a spiritual vantagepoint transcends the moral injunctions of consistency. A spiritual approach also presupposes a level of consciousness in which psychological fetters are transcended.

Paradoxically, one must resolve the question of leather on one's own, without resort to convention or popular opinion. The answer is an individual one, one which comes from the heart. The heart decides, and when a person has an open heart, the individual stance one takes in regard to leather dissolves into universal harmony

The Violence of Guilt

It is not uncommon for animal rights advocates to righteously act on the perception of inconsistency between caring for animals and possessing leather. Though the core of such action is sound--namely, compassion--there is a bond due to guilt that oc-

curs in one's motivation. Guilt is the result of distortion of caring or, put psychologically: guilt is the emotion that is experienced when self-punishment is mistaken for compassion. Guilt is the distortion of true caring.

In actuality, guilt is an act of violence toward oneself. It is also the source of the self-righteousness, fanaticism, and intolerance that characterizes the behavior of those animal rights advocates who have not yet had sufficient time to fortify the growing sense of compassion toward themselves which is the foundation of compassion toward others.

Thus, a supporter of animal rights often discovers that the use of leather involves animal suffering and summarily condemns him/herself for wretchedly failing to realize this long ago. Guilt wells up, which soon festers into a righteous indignation against the entire leather industry and all those who ignorantly, thoughtlessly support it by their slavery to fashion. Imprisoned between the walls of self-castigation and societal alienation, the nascent animal rights advocate suffers acute pangs of conscience.

Again, the root cause of moralistic denunciations or guilt is inner violence. This inner violence stems most basically from a refusal to accept what is, namely, that I possess leather goods which have been obtained through inexpressible suffering on the part of countless numbers of innocent animals. This is the truth of it.

Can one observe this fact without changing anything, without mixing in guilt or coercing oneself into faith and action?

In completely and attentively observing what is--without, for the moment changing oneself or others--an insight occurs: I am attached to these leather goods. Attachment is possession.

Suffering and Attachment

What do we mean by "attachment"? Attachment to leather goods means protecting the pleasure one experiences in the feel, smell, and look of the sturdy, expensive, soft leather that one has purchased, which unites us with others--with models who on television and in magazine advertisements cajole us to buy these fashionable goods.

The attachment we feel is derived from our craving to belong or conform to our idea of what will make us feel good, youthful, powerful, or beautiful.

So, we begin to appreciate how tenacious and complex is the hold of leather on us. And to act prematurely, impulsively, threatens to cause damage to our soul, through which our lifelong attachments are threaded.

Meditation As Radical Non-Action

To free oneself from psychological attachment which is connected to material possessions in the form of leather goods, the animal rights advocate must be willing to act radically. The most radical form of action, in spiritual terms, is non-action.

However, non-action does not mean doing nothing. On the contrary, non-action is one of the most difficult and demanding forms of action precisely because it is almost impossible to still our chattering, castigating minds. Yet, by stilling the mind through non-action, a revolutionary act occurs in which a profound feeling of compassion for oneself flows inside and, gradually, expands and circles out to include animals and other human beings. In short, the spiritual act of non-action is, in reality, the process of meditation, the complete and attentive observation of what is, without the superimposition of images and ideals of what "should be," which invariably causes inner conflict and strife. Through meditation, through observing what is, the mind gently comes to the realization that compassion, not coercion, is the root source of all action and interaction among sentient creatures. Out of meditation love grows and love, reverence for life, becomes the basis upon which decisions are made and actions taken regarding animal suffering.

I believe it was this meditative or spiritual approach which enabled Henry David Thoreau to declare his opposition to an unjust government that supported slavery, inspiring generations of civil disobedience. In Thoreau's immortal words, words which appear appropriate to the question of animal suffering;

Action from principle, the perception and performance of right, changes things and relations; it is essentially revolutionary. . . .

For it matters not how small the beginning may seem to be: what is once well done is done forever.[4]

Radical Spiritualism

It is readily seen how radical a spiritual approach to animal suffering is. Moral and philosophical discussions lend themselves easily to logical rules and principles that can be postulated, and once postulated, argued and debated. The spiritual approach, in contrast, is confined by no laws of nature or logic, which makes rationalist supporters of animal rights uneasy. If the defense of animal rights is based on something so ethereal and illogical as spiritual perception, these rationalists warn, then it can easily be dismissed by opponents as capricious and faulty. Moreover, the spiritual approach, being based on compassion, a rather rare and mercurial thing, cannot be taught, which makes it all the more elusive and undependable. In short, the spiritual approach to animal rights is a weak and flimsy defense, if a defense at all.

It is true: the spiritual approach to animal rights is no defense at all. It is no defense because, from a spiritual view, there is nothing to defend. The need for defense is based on conflict, and more defense simply perpetuates more conflict. Thus, from the spiritual perspective, animal rights are not defended. Rather, compassion is expanded: from within and emanating outward to include one's critics and opponents, the unknowing buyers of leather goods, the purveyors of the leather industry, and most of all, the animals who suffer. Through this ever-increasing growth of compassion for oneself and others, the animal rights advocate will progress down that pathless path in which leather and the spirit of the animal who suffered will be rightfully honored.

Honor

I have deliberately chosen the word "honor." It is not a term that one often hears in these times, not because honor is a rare thing, but because spiritual perception and sacrifice are rare things today. What is the relationship between honor and spiritual sacrifice?

To honor the spirit of animals who have suffered by choosing a compassionate course of action in regard to leather, I must have

transcended my ego-centered, narrow sense of self with which I ordinarily identify. But how is self-transcendence achieved through the act of honoring?

It is not. Self-transcendence occurs through spiritual sacrifice, and the act of honoring is a symbol of the self-transcendence that happens through sacrifice. In short, I cannot honor either human or animal as long as I am preoccupied with myself, my self-interests.

Two Kinds of Sacrifice

Now, there are two kinds of sacrifice, one of them genuinely spiritual, the other pseudo-spiritual. Traditionally, human beings honored the gods by sacrificing a tribes-member or animal. This was a form of pseudo-spiritual sacrifice because the act was motivated by fear or self-interest, the root of these being the same. Psychologically speaking, fear is a function of self-preoccupation, the antithesis of spiritual transcendence. No person who has gotten beyond fear would honor the divine by slaughtering--for this is the proper and accurate term to use--another human being or animal.

The only true form of spiritual sacrifice originates in compassion, the passionate caring with and for another, which occurs when self-centered preoccupations and concomitant fears are transcended. To put it another way: when you are the world, when you are compassionately in relation to all that exists, the act of spiritual sacrifice spontaneously happens and this act becomes a profound message to the rest of the world that you honor the spirit of the animals who have been slaughtered for their skins or hides. This is a fearless act, made without psychological fetters, and deeply spiritual because it comes from the heart. And because your act comes from the heart, it is a divine act which makes it right, above reproach from human-made laws and logic.

A Word On Courage

Something would be missing in this account without a word about courage. Courage has everything to do with the heart. In fact, the word itself derives from the Latin cor, meaning heart. To act, then, from one's heart is to act courageously. From a spiritual point of view, when I decide with an

open heart to honor through some act of sacrifice the spirit of the animal whose hide I possess, I am simultaneously acting courageously.

But notice one thing more: to act courageously is to act compassionately. In actuality the two are one: to act compassionately is to act courageously.

Conclusion

The question of what to do with one's leather possessions is individually resolved as each person meditates on the nature of his/her relationship to the spirit of life which unites us all and honors the suffering of animals past, present, and future. Through such attentive self-observation, an inner quiet occurs, and out of this extraordinary quiet, courageous action follows in the form of spiritual sacrifice that is based on what is right for each person. Remember, you are the world.[5]

Notes

1. One might contend that the absence of a spiritual view of animal rights leads to the pursuit of other approaches, such as the political, moral, philosophical, or aesthetic. If looked at solely from within the frame of reference of the particular approach--say, the political--it might indeed appear as though the activist was concerned only

with reform legislation, etc., unmoved by any spiritual impulse. However, in the space between these political efforts and reforms, during moments of self-doubt, anguish, or futility, one finds, I contend, the incipient stirrings of a spiritual perception toward animal suffering. Most people, however, suppress or squelch these stirrings, that is, their own suffering, in part by redoubling their political activism. Nevertheless, the primordial spiritual impulse exists, though it may be misinterpreted, dismissed, or channeled in other directions.

2. Krishnamurti is neither philosopher, educator, nor spiritualist; he belongs to no religion but speaks passionately about topics that are deeply spiritual. You Are the World (New York: Harper & Row, 1972) is one among many of his published works. See also, The Flight of the Eagle (New York: Harper & Row, 1971) and Beyond Violence (New York: Harper & Row, 1973).

3. Although beyond the focus of the present discussion, there are reasons that some animal rights supporters have given for continuing to use leather. Some of these reasons involve: (1) a distinction between meat, which is consumed, and leather, which is worn, (2) the greater durability of leather, (3) the difficulty of finding non-leather products, (4) the inferiority of many non-leather products, and (5) the fact that leather can be obtained following the natural death of an animal.

From the point of view of the present essay, what is crucial is the attitude with which each of these reasons for using leather is approached and discussed. Does one, for example, rigidly or compassionately discuss the distinction between eating the flesh of an animal and using its hide after the animal

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has been slaughtered? Can this person open his/her heart to the suffering that results from animals being destroyed for their hide or skins, or is this reality adamantly defended against? Through these means the spiritual nature of the question regarding the use of leather is appreciated.

4. H. D. Thoreau, "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience."

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