ANIMAL RIGHTS LANGUAGE AND THE PUBLIC POLITY

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I've been asked to add the third leg of a table, upon which we can place our concern for animals. (Tables need at least three legs to stand.) If we are concerned with

SOCIOLOGY

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animals, and concerned with nature, we must also be concerned with human beings. In this society, not only are we inhumane to animals, and to our environment; we are also inhumane to ourselves.

To add this leg, however, I shall have to chop away at the other two. Unfortunately, much of the language and argument used by the animal rights movement undercuts the possibility of nurturing human communities. This is not to say that concern for animals is incompatible with concern for humans--quite the contrary, I believe. But the language of "rights" limits our ability to develop a truly humane world. Demonstrating this is a tall order for a short talk, so I'll just outline my argument. Perhaps when I'm done, I can point out a more fruitful direction to go.

I should say at the outset that my remarks presuppose the distinction between animal "welfare" and animal "rights" [i.e., between seeking kind use of animals and seeking an end to the exploitation of animals. The goals of these two movements are different. The demand for rights is a far stronger demand. I am not recommending that this demand be abandoned. I merely wish to argue that the language in which that goal is phrased undercuts the possibility of its achievement.

A Humane Society

I am a sociologist, not a philosopher. So I begin with a social observation: most people don't take "animal rights" seriously. We all know this, by the way--just listen to any media interview with animal rights advocates, and you'll hear the suppressed laughter.

(Animal welfare advocates don't receive the same treatment, but as I've indicated my

quarrel is not with them.)

This is surprising, because talk of "rights" permeates our culture. Civil rights, women's rights, gay rights, victims' rights--our legal system is clogged with lawsuits placing right against right. As Robert Bellah and associates have pointed out in Habits of the Heart[1], our public language is steeped in utilitarian individualism--the language that sets person against person, each defending her or his little bit of moral turf.

Animal rights should fit in--but they do not. People agree that we should not mistreat animals, but not that they have "rights" equal to our own. Why not? Because in the popular mind animals are not "us"! The language of "rights" depends on our recognizing our kinship with one another. Philosophers and primatologists may acknowledge our communality with animals, but the public at large does not. And despite the wishes of philosophers, the public determines social policy--at least in the long run.

In the absence of a widespread recognition of our kinship with other species, talk of "rights" easily becomes talk of "wants". Animals and their advocates become one more special interest, which must compete with other interests--such as meat packers and lumber companies--at the public trough. Animals don't vote or create jobs, so their interests lose out.

Peter Singer and Tom Regan have each tried to extend the language of rights to animals, by showing that any dividing line we make between "them" and "us" must at least include a lot of "them" on our side. I don't denigrate their efforts, but socially speaking, I doubt they will catch on. The public isn't buying any more "rights" talk--we've got too many rights to consider right now.

But the problem with talk of "rights" is deeper than just inefficiency. Utilitarian individualism--the philosophical basis of rights language--parallels free-market economics in its reduction of values to individual costs and benefits. For that philosophy, the morality of every action depends on the pleasure and pain it brings: to individuals, not to families, towns, or nations. Much less to species or to the entire world. If something hurts an individual, it is bad; if something

helps an individual, it is good. What is good for me may be bad for you, or vice versa; as long as we recognize our equal status, we can negotiate a solution of relative benefit to each of us.

Missing from this language are such notions as "sacrifice", "service", and "duty". To put it more accurately, these alternate ethical notions are submerged. Where individual rights and utilities take first place, public life becomes a matter of balancing one individual (or group) against another. Social life becomes a matter of negotiation. Everyone must look out for her or his own interests.

When public life is reduced to such bargaining over the self-interests of society's members, argue Bellah et. al., the sense of community evaporates. Commitment to the greater good vanishes in the face of the primacy of private life. In their research, Bellah et. al. again and again find Americans incapable of articulating a vision of "the public good" that is greater than the sum of individual pleasures. The idiom of "getting and giving" prevents otherwise well-meaning people from participating in public life unless it rewards them. Those rewards may be tangible--money or power--or intangible--the joys of a job well done. But they must be present, or Americans cannot justify their toils to themselves.

"Duty"--the notion that one must act for others simply because one owes it to them--is empirically not a part of America's "first vocabulary". Listen, for example, to this therapist speak about "responsibility":

I do think it's important for you to take responsibility for yourself. I mean, nobody else is going to really do it. . . . In the end, you're really alone and you really have to answer to yourself. . . . I'm responsible for my acts. I'm not [responsible for my husband's]. He makes his own decisions. . . . I have a legal responsibility for [my children], but in a sense I think they in turn are responsible for their acts.[2]

In this language every relationship is based on "rights" and "fairness". Life together depends on

not one person making all the sacrifices or one always giving--[it depends on] having a relative balance between what's the giving end and getting your own way.[3]

Politics is similar:

Everybody wants to be on top and get their own way. It's like in a relationship. When I think about government policies, I guess I don't want them to cut off all aid to research in psychology unless they do some other things too that should be done. I mean, I don't want to be the only one who suffers. I don't want to be the only sucker. I don't want to be the fall guy for people who are not doing their part.[4]

As Bellah et. al. point out, for those who think in this idiom:

the hope of cooperative effort toward common ends is necessarily disappointed: the person who thinks in terms of the common good is a "sucker" in a situation where each individual is trying to pursue his or her own interests.[5]

The language of "rights" and "interests" cannot connect one individual's fulfillment to that of other people. Public life becomes "dirty work"--something to do only if you have to, usually while protecting oneself or others. Politicians--especially legislators--are only well-dressed criminals in the popular mind. How far we have come since Plato, for whom service to one's city was a sacred duty! Or since the days of our Founders, for whom public service was the highest imaginable privilege!

I am not arguing that Americans are not generous or warm-hearted; the yearly count of charitable contributions in our country belies that. But as Bellah et. al. have shown, in our culture virtue is private--a matter for individual, not social concern. The language of utilitarian individualism--the language of "rights"--abets this and, I believe, contributes to the demise of the public domain.

Can we have a truly humane community, in which we truly care for each other, if the idiom of public discourse centers on rights and privileges? Can we really act for others

where people think first of themselves and only secondarily of the good of the community? I think not.

And lacking humaneness among our species, can we extend humaneness to others? Again, I have my doubts. Those who seek to defend the "rights" of animals should take heed of the larger implications of the language that they use. What they succeed in selling may--in the long run--undermine their success.

Alternate Languages

That said, what kinds of arguments might those concerned with animals make that would mobilize the public at large without destroying the basis of interspecies cooperation?

At first blush we might appropriate the other half of utilitarian individualism and argue for the utility of humaneness to animals for our own lives. We could argue that anti-animal behavior encourages anti-human behavior, even that vegetarians are less aggressive. (Many people believe our society could use considerably less aggression). This argument quickly becomes empirical, and one has to deal with famous counter-instances--along with the possibility of being wrong. But I can imagine worse strategies.

The result, however, is a human-centered utility vulnerable to the changing winds of fad and circumstance. What happens, for example, if some future development makes animals unnecessary for human life? Or threatening to it? Should we do away with them? I doubt that many here will advocate such a move.

A better strategy, in my opinion, is to change languages. If individualist language erodes our social life, as Bellah et. al. have indicated, and furthermore does not mobilize public support for animals, then both we and the animals are better off changing tongues.

Bellah et. al. identify two alternate languages in American life which would be worth exploring.

The first of these is what they call "the biblical tradition." Based in Genesis but to be found elsewhere as well, this tradition emphasizes the createdness of all

species, including ourselves. It emphasizes their common standing in the face of God: as worthy creatures whose harmonious interrelationship is "good". Though historically this tradition has justified the human domination of nature, it contains a lighter side emphasizing human "stewardship". This stewardship--developed--could be an ample source of social motivation for interspecies care.

(Other participants at this conference appear to be exploring this path. I am especially impressed by Tom Regan's new film, "We Are All Noah". Rather than duplicating their efforts here, I will merely urge them on.)

A second alternate language may be found in what Bellah et. al. call the "republican tradition". (That's republican with a small "r"; the current Republican Party has a thoroughly individualistic orientation.) They identify this tradition as follows:

Republicanism originated in the cities of classical Greece and Rome, was expressed in the civic humanism of late medieval and early modern Europe, and contributed to the formation of modern Western democracies. It presupposes that the citizens of a republic are motivated by civic virtue as well as self-interest. It views public participation as a form of moral education and sees its purposes as the attainment of justice and the public good.[6]

This is the language of Washington and Madison, of Jefferson and Lincoln. It was also--occasionally--the language of John Kennedy, to whom we still respond.

That this language has much to contribute to the renewal of public life--the third topic of this conference, upon which I have been asked to speak--Bellah et. al. leave no doubt. A society in which persons see social service as a duty would--in their analysis--be a better ordered, more coherent society than the one we are presently coming to be.

But would it help the animals? That is a harder question. It would not, certainly, if the notion of "public good" were limited to the good of our own species. Plato and Aristotle limited their republicanism to their city, with no regard to the barbarians beyond their gates. Washington and Madison limited theirs to white male property-owners.

Given current international tensions, one may legitimately doubt our ability to think beyond political borders, much less biological ones.

But I am concerned with possible accomplishments, not just easy ones. It seems to me that if Americans can be taught to think of their duties to the wider community of which they are a part, and if their notion of community can be expanded to encompass our fragile planet's other inhabitants, basic and radical changes will take place. The task is two-fold: to restore our sense of responsibility for our common life, and to expand our notion of the common to include our fellow-travelers on this blue-green ball.

The second step--expanding our notion of community--is a matter of education, and

THE CALF'S PRAYER

REBECCA CHAPMAN

Shall I be born unto this land
Of majestic mountains and fruited plains?
To stand on eager, fragile limbs?
To breathe the spirit of life?

Oh, Mother, you are warm beside me
And your milk flows sweetly.
I would not stray,
But close to you, I learn our way.

May we frolic in the soft meadow
Where sun pours forth upon the grass?
Together graze and linger?
Taste of the clear brook?

We gather with our kind
Beneath the sheltering tree
And as twilight scents the air
Your loving comforts me.

Awaiting with bowed heads
The dawning of tomorrow,
In the dark we dream and pray:
Let not the hand of man take us away.

ultimately of empirical demonstration. Every finding of the science of ecology reinforces our common planetary destiny, and I have no doubt that someday it will be common knowledge that all species "are in this together". But it is a further step to get humans to act for the common good. I agree with Bellah et. al. that to do so we must revive the submerged language of civic virtue--the republican tradition. Only with the restoration of the public polity can Americans create a humane community.

Notes

1. Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler and Steven M. Tipton, Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

2. Ibid.: 15-16.

3. Ibid.: 16.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.: 335.

- continued from p. 75 -
FOX

Finally, to be consistent, the argument that benefiting from harms caused to other animals is always wrong should be applied to other parts of one's life, as much as possible. This means giving up animals and animal products for food, clothing, and so on, except when it is absolutely essential to use them. It would also require an entire re-evaluation of one's relationship to nature. It means, in short, nothing less than the search for a whole new way of life. To avoid the negativism of the view that we are always in the wrong in our dealings with the environment, let this be thought of as learning to live in harmony with nature.

Notes

1. Peter Singer, Animal Liberation (New York: Avon Books, 1975): 7.

- continued to p. 82 -

ty rather than of inner peace. Injustice, disharmony, waste and wanton destruction arise from human ignorance. It is the wisdom of enlightened self-interest that recognizes the importance of obedience to the Law that Bill Neidjie so vividly details for his people who have lived for some 50,000 years in civilized harmony with their environment.

As the !Kung bushmen see it, we are all part of the same dream that is dreaming us (i.e., of the same creation). We destroy this dream when we do not live according to the Law.

The reality of dream-time is difficult for non-native westerners to comprehend. Poet Rainer Marie Rilke in the Duino Elegies comes close to it, referring to it as the invisible. He observes:

Transitoriness is everywhere plunging into profound Being . . . Nature, the things we move about among and use are provisional and perishable; but so long as we are here, they are our possession and our friendship, sharers in our trouble and gladness, just as they have been the confidants of our ancestors. Therefore, not only must all that is here not be corrupted or degraded, but, just because of that very provisionality they share with us, all these appearances and things should be comprehended by us in a most fervent understanding and transformed. Transformed? Yes, for our task is to stamp this provisional, perishing earth into ourselves so deeply, so painfully and passionately, that its being may rise again "invisibly" in us.

In other words, we must consciously become part of the dream that is dreaming us all, or at least obey the Law, even if we do not apprehend its source and wisdom. This is the path to world peace, the way of beauty, justice, humility, compassion and love. Lao Tzu called this quite simply, Tao. And the Law of the Tao for all civilizations is to respect that the loving harmony of humanity and Nature (symbolized in the embrace of yin and yang) is the way of fulfillment for the whole of creation—and for the "Dreamer of the dream that is dreaming us" everywhere.

Notes

1. In Kadaku Man (N.S.W. Australia: Mybrood P/L, Inc., 1985).

- continued from p. 80 -
FOX

2. Jerrold Tannenbaum, Review of Michael Allen Fox, The Case for Animal Experimentation, The Scientist 1 (Oct 20, 1986): 19, 22.

3. Robert E. Goodin, "Ethical Principles for Environmental Protection," in Robert Elliot and Arron Gare, eds., Environmental Philosophy (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1983): 15 (author's emphasis).

4. Charles Fried, Right and Wrong (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978): 30.

5. Tom Regan, The Case for Animal Rights (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

6. To deliberately cause harm to others with no desire for personal gain is pure maliciousness and evil. To deliberately cause harm with the sole intent of benefiting from another's suffering is using another as a mere means to one's own ends and is at least as evil. One can think of examples where it is not wrong to benefit from another's suffering, but these would generally have to do with self-defense or self-protection.

7. The quotations are from Albert Schweitzer, Civilization and Ethics (The Philosophy of Civilization, Part III), 2nd ed., trans. C. T. Campion (London: A. & C. Black, 1929): 260, 264, and My Life and Thought, trans. C. T. Campion (London: A. Y. C. Black, 1933): 271.

8. John Passmore, Man's Responsibility for Nature: Ecological Problems and Western Traditions, 2nd ed. (London: Duckworth, 1980): 84.