

BETWEEN THE SPECIES

www.cla.calpoly.edu/bts/

Issue VI

August 2006

Animals and the Ethics of Domination[•]

Charles K. Fink

Miami-Dade College

When first encountered by Europeans in 1642, Tasmania, lying about two hundred miles off the southeast coast of Australia, supported an indigenous population of about five thousand people. The Tasmanians, isolated from other cultures for perhaps ten thousand years, were technologically about the most unsophisticated people on earth. They were hunter-gatherers, equipped with only a few simple stone and wooden tools. They had not even invented fire. British sealers and settlers arrived in 1800, and within just three-quarters of a century, the genocide was complete. The last Tasmanian man died in 1869, and the last Tasmanian women in 1876. According to Jared Diamond's account, "Whites kidnapped Tasmanian children as laborers, kidnapped women as consorts, mutilated or killed men." "One shepherd shot nineteen Tasmanians with a swivel gun loaded with nails." A bounty was placed on their heads: "five British pounds for each adult, two pounds for each child, caught alive." Government-sponsored groups "consisting of convicts led by police, hunted down and killed Tasmanians." Soldiers "were authorized to kill on sight any Tasmanian in the settled areas." Scientists took an interest in the last few surviving natives. When William Lanner, the last Tasmanian man, died in 1869, scientists "alternately dug up and reburied Lanner's body, cutting off parts of it and stealing them back and forth from each other." One scientist removed Lanner's head, another his hands and feet, yet another his ears and nose. One scientist "made a tobacco pouch out of Lanner's skin."^[1]

This is by no means an isolated example. The same drama, altering the details here and there, is repeated throughout history whenever a "civilized," "powerful" or "superior" people encounter a "primitive," "weak" or "inferior" people. When Christopher Columbus and his men came ashore in the Bahamas, the Arawak Indians—the people who originally populated most of the Caribbean islands—reacted to their arrival with the awe and innocence of children. From Columbus's own journals we learn: "They willingly traded everything they owned.... They do not bear arms, and do not know them, for I showed them a sword, they took it by the edge and cut themselves out of ignorance. They have no iron. Their spears are made of cane." And then these

chilling words: “They would make fine servants.... With fifty men we could subjugate them all and make them do whatever we want.”^[2]

The ethics of domination—that “might makes right”—involves essentially two components: first, the judgment that one group, the dominate group, is superior to another group, the subordinate group; and second, the moral principle that the superior group has the right to dominate—to control, exploit, subjugate, exterminate, even devour—the inferior group. Together these two claims provide a moral justification for domination—the domination of one culture by another, one gender by another, one socio-economic class by another, one species by another. My aim in the following article is to explore how religion, language, education, and industry have shaped our moral consciousness of oppressed groups—particularly animals—and rationalized their exploitation.

1. Religion

The Judeo-Christian tradition teaches us that human beings are created in the image of God and are alone endowed with an immortal soul. Our privileged place in nature is assured by the book of Genesis, where, we are told, man has been granted dominion over all the animals of the earth.

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth” (1:26).

And God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth. The fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every bird of the air, upon everything that creeps on the ground and all the fish of the sea; into your hand they are delivered. Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; and as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything” (9:1-3).

Not only were animals delivered into our hands for food, but also for blood sacrifice. “For the life of the creature is in the blood,” we read in Leviticus, “and I [the Lord] have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar” (17:10). Various types of offerings are identified—burnt offerings, fellowship offerings, sin offerings, and guilt offerings—along with the different kinds of animals suitable for these sacrificial rituals. The offerings themselves are described in vivid detail:

If the offering to the Lord is a burnt offering of birds, he is to offer a dove or a young pigeon. The priest shall bring it to the altar, wring off the head and burn it on the altar; its blood shall be drained out on the side of the altar. He is to remove the crop with its contents and throw it to the east side of the altar, where the ashes are. He shall tear it open by the wings, not severing it completely, and then the priest shall burn it on the wood that is on the fire on the altar. It is a burnt offering made by fire, an aroma pleasing to the Lord (1:14-17).

The chilling refrain, “It is a burnt offering made by fire, an aroma pleasing to the Lord,” is repeated no fewer than five times in Leviticus (1:9, 1:13, 1:17, 2:9, 3:5, and 23:18). In the King James Bible, there are more than 30 references to the “sweet savour” of burnt offerings (seventeen in Leviticus alone), beginning with Noah’s animal sacrifices in Genesis 8:21. Smelling the “sweet savour” of Noah’s offerings, God vowed never again

to “curse the ground” for man’s sake. The story well illustrates the redemptive power of animal sacrifice. Genesis 8:21, we might note, is the second mention of animal sacrifice in the Bible. The first occurs in Genesis 4:4, in connection with the story of Cain and Abel. God looked with favor upon Abel, who offered “the firstlings of his flock,” but not upon Cain, who offered “the fruit of the ground.” Grain offerings are sanctioned by the Bible, but they are regarded as inferior to animal sacrifices. For whatever reason, the Lord of the ancient Israelites demanded the spilling of blood as atonement for sin: “It is the blood that makes atonement for one’s life” (Leviticus 17:10); “Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness” (Hebrews 9:22). Since there was much to be forgiven, a great deal of animal blood was shed. We can only imagine how many animals were butchered in these brutal rituals. One indication is found in 1 Kings (8:63), where it is reported that Solomon once sacrificed 22,000 cattle and 120,000 sheep and goats over a period of fourteen days as a fellowship offering to the Lord.

It is not difficult to find stories in the Old Testament that convey similarly harsh attitudes toward women. Consider, for example, Chapter 19 of Genesis. When two angels in the form of men are sent to warn Lot of the impending destruction of Sodom, a crowd surrounds the house and demands that the two men be surrendered for sex. “Bring them out to us,” the Sodomites demand, “so that we can have sex with them” (19:5). Lot refuses. Instead, he offers the crowd his two virgin daughters. “I have two daughters who have never slept with a man. Let me bring them out to you and you can do what you like with them” (19:8). After this conflict is resolved, Lot along with his wife and two daughters flee the city. Although they are warned not to look back as Sodom is destroyed, Lot’s wife cannot resist the temptation. For her disobedience, she is transformed into a pillar of salt (19:26). Safely ensconced in a mountain cave, Lot’s two daughters conspire to seduce their father so that they might incestuously continue the paternal line. “Let’s get our father to drink wine,” one daughter suggests to the other, “and then lie with him and preserve our family line through our father” (19:32). Accordingly, both daughters become pregnant by their father and produce two boys, Moab and Ben-Ammi.

In *Women and Men*, Nancy Bonvillain provides several examples of the patriarchal bias of the Christian God.^[3] As punishment for transgressing against the authority of the Lord, Eve and all subsequent generations of women are consigned to pain and subservience. “I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing,” Eve is told, “with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you” (Genesis 3:16). In Ephesians we read: “Wives, be subject to your husbands as to the Lord; for the man is the head of the woman, just as Christ also is head of the Church...but just as the Church is subject to Christ, so must women be to their husbands in everything” (5:22-24). According to the Biblical account of creation, man was not created from woman; rather woman was created from man, and created to serve his needs. Thus we read in Corinthians (11:8-10): “For man did not originally spring from woman, but woman was made out of man; and man was not created for woman’s sake, but woman for the sake of man.”

Just as Christianity taught women to be submissive to their husbands, it also taught slaves to be submissive to their masters. In the same Bible where we find, “Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you,” we also find, “Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to win

their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the lord” (Colossians 3:22). In His instructions to the Israelites before their invasion of Canaan, the Lord specifically *demand*ed the taking of slaves (Deuteronomy 20:10-14); and there are many passages in Exodus concerning the regulation of slavery (20:10; 21:2-11, 20, 26, 27, 30). It is true, at least according to Exodus, that God liberated the Israelites from bondage in Egypt. But this was only *after* 430 years of captivity (12:41), and only because of the covenant made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (2:24). Nowhere in the Bible does one find an explicit condemnation of slavery. Incidentally, the Lord’s instructions in Deuteronomy 20:10-14 did not apply to Canaan, but to “far off” lands. So far as Canaan was concerned, God ordered that every living thing be killed—every man, woman, child, and animal (20:16-17). I mention these facts because it is possible to find Biblical support for many moral abominations, including slavery and genocide. Regardless of one’s religious faith, one cannot validly infer that something is morally acceptable simply because the Bible condones it, whether this is slavery, capital punishment, war, the oppression of women, or the use of animals for food.

Although there is some evidence that vegetarianism was practiced by early Christians, and even that Jesus himself advocated vegetarianism,^[4] by the fourth century it was officially denounced as a heresy. Constantine, the first Christian emperor of Rome, had little tolerance for vegetarianism and ordered that those convicted of this heresy have molten lead poured down their throats.^[5] Pope Pius IX even prohibited the establishment of an animal welfare office in Rome, arguing that people have obligations to one another, but not to animals.^[6] In the Judeo-Christian worldview, the universe was created for man as the stage on which he acts out his spiritual drama, and animals are little more than props on this stage. Only *man* was created in the image and likeness of God; only *man* has an immortal soul; and only *man* lives a religious life and seeks salvation. Sadly, the only meaningful role which animals play in this spiritual drama is as burnt offerings. St. Thomas Aquinas, by far the most influential theologian in the history of Christianity, summed it up in a few words: “[B]y divine providence [animals] are intended for man’s use in the natural order. Hence it is not wrong for man to make use of them, either by killing them or in any other way whatever.”^[7]

In the West, we are the heirs to a religious tradition which views animals as food, as domesticated servants, as property, as instruments for sacrificial rituals—in short, as mere things. The words of Aquinas are echoed in the writings of our most respected moral philosophers. “Animals...are there merely as a means to an end,” writes Immanuel Kant. “That end is man. We can ask, ‘Why do animals exist?’ But to ask, ‘Why does man exist?’ is a meaningless question.”^[8] Although the worldview which supported this bold statement has been overturned by the scientific discovery that human beings, like all other animals, are the accidental products of evolution, anthropocentrism remains the cornerstone of our moral outlook. So far as our treatment of animals is concerned, Western morality has scarcely evolved beyond the dark period in human history when animal blood was shed as atonement for sin. The step from the sacrificial altar of the ancient Hebrews to the knock box of the modern slaughterhouse is a small one.

2. Language

Feminists have persuasively argued that linguistic conventions have contributed to the marginalization and objectification of women. Most notorious is the gender-neutral use of “man,” “he,” and “his,” which diminishes the status of females through omission, as in “Man is the rational animal.” Females are similarly rendered invisible by the convention of referring to a married woman by her husband’s full name preceded by “Mrs.,” as in “Mrs. George W. Bush.” The custom whereby a woman loses her original last name and acquires her husband’s conveys that she is her husband’s property, and so does the convention of referring to newlyweds as “man and wife.” Other linguistic conventions confer a secondary status upon females, as in such common orderings as “man and woman,” “he and she,” “husband and wife,” “boys and girls.” Such words as “manpower,” “masterful,” “mastermind,” and “statesmanship” are suggestive of male dominance. To “man” something, such as a machine, is to control it. Other common expressions trivialize females, their emotions, or their actions: while men “yell,” women “screech” or “shriek”; while men “laugh,” women “giggle”; while men are “angry,” women are “hysterical”; while men “complain,” women “nag”; while men “talk,” women “chatter” or “gossip.” (The “brank” or “scold’s bridle collar” was a device used as recently as the nineteenth century to punish women for gossiping. The device consisted of an iron mask, perhaps adorned with donkey ears, that was fastened around a woman’s head to prevent her from talking.) “Continual repetition of English words and expressions,” Nancy Bonvillain points out, “both as speakers and hearers, reinforces cultural evaluations that enhance males’ status and devalue females. These judgments do not originate in the language but arise linguistically to express, supplement, and justify entrenched cultural constructs.”^[9]

Similar observations might be made with respect to animals. “Just as the generic ‘he’ erases female presence,” notes Carol Adams, “the generic ‘it’ erases the living, breathing nature of animals and reifies their object status. The absence of a non-sexist pronoun allows us to objectify the animal world by considering all animals as ‘its’.”^[10] It is, for instance, appropriate to say, “A wolf is fiercely protective of *its* young,” but not, “My neighbor is fiercely protective of *its* young.” When English-speaking children begin to conceptualize the world, they soon learn that while human beings belong in the personal category of “he” and “she,” other animals are resigned to the impersonal category of “it”—the category of tables, chairs, rocks, machines and all other mere things.

While the generic “it” objectifies animals, other expressions reinforce negative attitudes toward them: the cowardly chicken, the stubborn mule, the lazy dog, the scared cat, the filthy pig, the hare-brained rabbit, the bird-brained bird, the sheepish sheep, the pompous ass, the crazy loon, as well as such pejoratives as “bitch,” “worm,” “rat,” “weasel,” “jackass,” “snake.” When we describe hardened criminals as “animals,” not only do we express contempt for them, we also imply that they are not deserving of compassion or moral consideration. And even when we acknowledge the sobering truth that human beings are, after all, just animals—genetically almost indistinguishable from chimpanzees—our animal cousins are stigmatized as “lower” or “subhuman” animals. (For comparison, imagine the implications of describing women as “submen,” or non-white races as “subwhite.”)

Language also softens or conceals the harsh realities of animal exploitation. We speak of animal “domestication” rather than of animal enslavement. Hunting and fishing are described as “sports” rather than as recreational animal abuse. Hunters do not kill

animals, but “take game.” Ranchers exterminate “pests” or “vermin.” Game wardens “cull the herd.” Trappers “harvest” foxes. Scientists “euthanize” rabbits. The ancient Hebrews “sacrificed” lambs. Animal shelters “put to sleep” or “put down” unwanted cats and dogs. An animal prison is a “zoological garden.” A slaughterhouse is a “meat plant.” Laboratory rats are “animal models” or even “integrated organ systems.” Ethologists study animal “behavior,” not animal psychology. Laboratory animals do not feel pain; rather they exhibit “aversive behavior.” Cows, pigs, and chickens are “grain consuming animal units.”^[11] A laying hen is an “efficient converting machine.”^[12] A breeding sow is a “valuable piece of machinery, whose function is to pump out baby pigs like a sausage machine.”^[13] While producers conceal the living, breathing, feeling presence of farm animals behind such phrases as “layers,” “broilers,” “milkers,” and “porkers,” consumers disguise the animal origins of the food they eat with such euphemisms as “beef,” “veal,” “pork,” “poultry,” and “mutton.” Hamburger is ground “beef,” not ground cow-muscle. (Among meat eaters in India, the subterfuge is even more artful: sheep meat is “red vegetable,” fish are “water beans,” and prawns are “Shiva biscuits.”) Some animals are *by definition* consumer products. In Webster’s Dictionary, we find silhouettes of slaughtered animals under the definition of “lamb.” Suspended upside-down, decapitated, forelimbs clipped, bearing the labels of different cuts of meat—all traces of the fact that an actual lamb is a living animal, not a consumer product, have been erased.

3. Education

When children participate in animal dissections, they are taught to view frogs, fish, fetal pigs, and other animals as mere things, as “integrated organ systems.” Field trips to zoos and aquariums teach children that animals exist for our entertainment and amusement. When popular prejudices are presupposed rather than critically examined, students assimilate them as “common knowledge.” Consider, for example, the following passages from *Thinking*—ironically, a textbook on critical thinking—by Gary R. Kirby and Jeffery R. Goodpaster^[14]:

Emotions are an important mark of human experience. They are in part what separates humans from machines and the lower animals, for machines can compute but they can not experience joy. And animals may find themselves attached to others, but they do not love them (30).

To enhance recall, these associations should be as ridiculous and lively as you can make them. For example, if you want to remember “alligator,” you can imagine biting into a bun, expecting a juicy hamburger, and finding a baby alligator instead—who, much to your surprise cries, “Ouch! What do you think you’re doing?” If the eighth word you are trying to remember is “rocking chair,” you can imagine fishing with a rocking chair as bait (76-7).

One study found that even aged rats who had lived all their lives in a sterile world could benefit from a stimulating environment.... Put in a world with mazes, bridges, and spinning wheels, these rats developed an average of 2,000 new synapses *per neuron*! It would be unethical to perform such a study with human beings, of course, but the implication of this research is that it may never be too late for us to start growing toward our potential (67).

There are many ways to conduct these studies, each with its own advantages and disadvantages, as we discuss later. For instance, in our cola example, we could feed large quantities of cola to chimpanzees and after a while compare their cancer rates with those of a group of chimpanzees that did not receive cola. Or we could find human beings with a history of excessive cola consumption and compare their cancer incidence with that of humans who avoid such consumption (205).

Arguably, ethical problems are avoided by using animal subjects instead of humans. Granted, we can't use animals to study child abuse, but a controlled experimental design looking for the possible cancer-causing effects of a particular drug could be conducted with animal subjects (220).

In the first passage, “lower” animals are compared to unfeeling machines. Amazingly, the authors simply take it for granted that animals, like machines, are incapable of love. The second passage makes approving references to eating “juicy hamburgers” and fishing. The remaining passages reinforce the central prejudice: that *of course* there are ways in which we may treat animals—conducting invasive experiments upon them, caging them in sterile environments, dissecting their brains, force-feeding them cola, infecting them with cancer—in which it would be wrong to treat human beings.

4. Industry

Industries, especially those directly involved in animal exploitation, reinforce such prejudices. McDonald's is the largest purchaser of beef and pork in the country. It also spends more money on advertising (\$1 billion annually) and marketing than any other corporation, and is one of the largest suppliers of toys. Toys are powerful tools of socialization. A toy from the Old South depicts a black man hanging from a tree. By turning a crank, children can make the man dance. One vintage McDonald's toy is a plastic steak to which a hat, nose, orange mustache, sunglasses, and appendages (including blue bulging biceps) are attached.

In preparation for their socially prescribed adult roles, notes Linda L. Lindsey, “Girls will be given dolls to diaper and tiny stoves on which to cook pretend meals. Boys will construct buildings with miniature tools and wage war with toy guns and tanks.”^[15] Dolls, play stoves, and tea sets encourage domesticity and subservience, whereas construction sets, toy guns, and sports equipment encourage activities outside the home, aggression, and competition. The National Cattlemen's Beef Association has created a website, “Cool 2B Real,” to promote meat consumption among teenage girls. “The site,” one article explains, “which looks like a cross between a Barbie fan page and a Taco Bell ad (beef-filled tacos and gigantic hamburgers dot the screen), extols teenage girls to ‘Keep it Real’ — ‘real’ as in a person who eats beef, preferably three or four times a day.”^[16] Visitors to the site are polled on such questions such as “What type of beef do you most like to eat with your friends?”

An advertisement for Florida's Gatorland, typifies our consumer culture's perception of animals. Here an alligator is represented, not as a whole living being, but as a collection of undetached consumer goods. Various parts of the animal are identified by arrows accompanied by such comments as “Small stuffed alligator heads sell for \$14.98 at Gatorland,” and “Teeth: Gatorland strings them into necklaces, \$3.98 each,” and “Toenails: Make dandy backscratchers, which Gatorland sells for \$4.98 each.” The

owner of Gatorland, Frank Godwin, is quoted as saying, “We try to sell everything except the grunt.”

All things considered, is it so surprising that for many people, talk of “animal rights” seems excessively sentimental, if not ridiculous? “The death of the other animals is an accepted part of life,” writes Carol Adams,

either envisioned as being granted in Genesis 1:26 by a human-oriented God who instructs us that we may dominate the animals or conceptualized as a right because of our superior rationality. For those who hold to this dominant viewpoint in our culture the surprise is not that animals are oppressed (though this is not the term they would use to express human beings’ relationship to the other animals), the surprise is that anyone would object to this.^[17]

Animals are hunted for sport, trapped for their skins, trained for our amusement, imprisoned in zoos, paraded in circuses, manufactured as consumer products, utilized as research tools, and employed as machines and labor-saving devices. We celebrate our supremacy over them in rodeos, horse races, bullfights and other blood spectacles. Even “man’s best friend” is mass-produced in puppy mills, sold in stores like other commodities, chained in the backyard, occasionally mutilated (with clipped ears and a docked tail) for show, and conveniently disposed of when no longer serviceable. (One could not ask for a clearer illustration of the pet industry’s “commodification” of animals than the “GloFish,” a genetically engineered glow-in-the-dark aquarium fish.) If this is our collective cultural experience of animals, how could it be doubted that we are entitled to use them for food? “Meat,” writes Michael Allen Fox, “is the quintessential symbol of our species’ domination of nature, our capacity to transform life into death, to conquer and exploit what is other, what is at our mercy.”^[18] Religion, language, education, advertising, and other ideological institutions all contribute to a worldview within which the domination of animals seems perfectly sane and justified. Seen through the lens of this worldview, other animals *are* mere things; hence, we can easily rationalize their oppression, exploitation, and consumption.

* I thank Dr. Howard Pospesel for his comments on an earlier version of this article. Some of the material contained in this article also appears in my *God, the Way, and the Self: A Multicultural Introduction to Philosophy*, Fourth Edition (Kendall-Hunt, 2002).

^[1] *The Third Chimpanzee* (HarperCollins, 1992), 278-281.

^[2] Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States: 1492-Present* (HarperCollins, 1996), 1.

^[3] *Women and Men: Cultural Constructs of Gender* (Prentice-Hall, 1995), 213.

^[4] Steven Rosen, *Food for the Spirit* (Bala Books, 1987), 15-39. Andrew Linzey, *Animal Theology* (University of Illinois Press, 1995), 133.

^[5] John Hill, *The Case for Vegetarianism: Philosophy for a Small Planet* (Rowman and Littlefield, 1996), 34-35.

^[6] See Linzey, *Animal Theology*, 19.

^[7] From Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* (Benziger Brothers, 1928). Reprinted in Tom Regan and Peter Singer (eds.), *Animal Rights and Human Obligations*, Second Edition (Prentice-Hall, 1989).

- ^[8] From Immanuel Kant, "Duties to Animals and Spirits," *Lectures on Ethics* (Harper and Row, 1963). Reprinted in Regan and Singer (eds.), *Animal Rights and Human Obligations*.
- ^[9] *Women and Men*, 48. For a fuller discussion of the points raised in this paragraph, see Bonvillain's discussion in Chapter 9, especially 241-49. See also Carol Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory*, especially 36, 37, 48, 49, and 63-75.
- ^[10] Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, 64.
- ^[11] So described by the FDA. Quoted in Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, 68.
- ^[12] According to one trade magazine, *Farmer and Stockbreeder*. Quoted in John Robbins, *Diet for a New America* (Stillpoint, 1987), 53.
- ^[13] According to *National Hog Farmer*. Quoted in Robbins, *Diet for a New America*, 85.
- ^[14] *Thinking*, Third Edition (Prentice-Hall, 2002).
- ^[15] "Culture Determines Gender Roles." Reprinted in Auriana Ojeda (ed.), *Male/Female Roles: Opposing Viewpoints* (Greenhaven Press, 2000), 74-81.
- ^[16] Jessica Reaves, "Where's the Beef (In the Teenage Diet)?" *Time Magazine*, January 2003.
- ^[17] *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, 65.
- ^[18] "Environmental Ethics and the Ideology of Eating Meat," *Between the Species*, Summer, 1993.