

ROUSSEAU AND VOLTAIRE: THE ENLIGHTENMENT AND ANIMAL RIGHTS

RAYMOND GIRAUD

Stanford University

In his extraordinary work, Animals' Rights, first published in 1892, Henry Salt, although giving much credit to humanitarian feeling in antiquity and the Renaissance, situated the first true development of the concept of animal rights in the Enlightenment. "It was not until the eighteenth century, the age of enlightenment and 'sensibility' of which Voltaire and Rousseau were the spokesmen," he wrote, "that the rights of animals obtained more deliberate recognition" (p. 4). Indeed, in our contemporary understanding of the word, all of its variants and offshoots (the rights of man, of the citizen, of women, slaves, prisoners, gays--and of animals, too) stem from that period when the European bourgeoisie, and by extension the American as well, formulated a revolutionary ideology that, in the language of the time, called for liberation from tyranny, despotism, and oppression and vindicated liberative action by the elaboration of a network of "rights"--among them life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, as well as some that we might consider more esoteric, like the right to own property, but which Voltaire likened to the cry of nature.

Neither Rousseau nor Voltaire can probably be considered a major contributor to the development of the concept of animal rights, but Salt's words are no less true for that. More direct attacks on human mistreatment of animals in the name of their innate (if not God-given) rights and on the model of the ongoing struggle for human rights (not just those of the male, white bourgeoisie but of women, slaves, proletarians, and colonial peoples) found their source in the writings of the Enlightenment philosophers, among them, Rousseau and Voltaire, who both addressed themselves to the question of the relation between men and beasts.

That question had long been one of iden-



tification or even of kinship. Sadly, perhaps, we must admit the immense resistance human beings present to recognizing obligations even to individuals of their own race and species without a prior demonstration of some sort of kinship. "Blood is thicker than water." The author of the medieval Chanson de Roland expressed this parochial conviction with admirable succinctness; "Christians are right (unt droit); pagans are wrong." The old British device invokes "Dieu et mon droit" (God and my right), not the rights of others.

Rousseau and Voltaire inherited from their recent past as a target for criticism an analysis of man's radical difference from other living creatures that was riddled with contradictions but had acquired status because of the unquestionable brilliance of its author, the great Rene Descartes. In an effort doubtless directed both toward countering accusations of heresy and justifying the use of animals in experimentation ("absolving men from the suspicion of crime," in his words), Descartes argued that animals were natural automata, incapable of thought and feeling and moved by divinely created mechanisms analogous to the ingenious spring-operated clockwork devices that human beings had used to give a semblance of life to their own inanimate creations. (If one leaves God out of the equation, Descartes' explanation of animal behavior is not very far from the one that present-day behavioristic sociobiologists offer for the conduct of human beings, whose every gesture is dictated by an inherited genetic code and who can find virtue or vice in pills or liquid potions, much like their literary model, Stevenson's Dr.



PHILOSOPHY

Jekyll.) Why God endowed these insentient mechanical creatures with a complete set of sensory organs remarkably similar to those of human beings, Descartes failed to explain, although he clearly was aware of this embarrassing impediment to the plausibility of his argument and admitted that the presence of those organs might lead less subtle minds than his to the false conclusion that animals were capable of sensation.

With this over-easy dismissal of a grave moral problem that had troubled others for centuries, Descartes affirms a somewhat facile seal to the position that there is a radical and absolute difference, an unbridgeable gulf separating humanity from all other creatures on earth (theologians were willing to speculate on our possible kinship with demons and angels, distant cousins in heaven or hell, related to us by their intellect). One of the problems Descartes' position created for him was that it was irreconcilable with a belief in evolution, and there seem to be some hints that he thought the evolutionary process not inconceivable. A century later, the naturalist Buffon would adopt a similarly contradictory stance, adhering to orthodox Christian belief in the idea of separate creation for humankind, but also clearly aware of the many functional and structural resemblances between us and other animals. Obviously, acceptance of the implications of zoological observation required either exceptional courage or the advent of an era in which Christian dogma would be put on the defensive. Needless to say, Voltaire and Rousseau not only lived in such an era, as Buffon did, too, but possessed extraordinary courage. Discreet as Voltaire could be and timid as Rousseau surely was in many situations, they jeopardized their freedom and even their lives with much of what they wrote.

It would be extravagant, however, to see either of these two as putting his neck on the block for animals' rights, or even as considering this a central issue. Neither one--and this is not to their discredit--went so far in his repudiation of the Cartesian characterization of animals as Darwin would in the next century, most explicitly in The Descent of Man. Darwin's writing--and this was for many of his contemporaries, as it still is today for "Creationists," the most horrifying aspect of it--tended toward a recognition of a literal blood relationship or consanguinity, our true family relation-

ship with those species that even he continued to call the "lower orders." Born with what Darwin called "a pedigree of prodigious length," man owes that birth to a long line of non-human progenitors. "Unless we willfully close our eyes," Darwin concluded in his chapter on the genealogy of man, "we may, with our present knowledge, approximately recognize our parentage." "Nor," he added, "need we feel ashamed of it" (The Descent of Man, chapter VI). Darwin was not the first to reject the belief that man is the work of a separate act of creation, although his writings went farther to establish the certainty of our physical relatedness to other animals than any had before. But if we distinguish the "scientific" demonstration of a literal family-tree sort of kinship from the sentiment of sharing in a common nature, involving both physical and spiritual relatedness, then Voltaire and Rousseau are readily identifiable among Darwin's predecessors--more than Descartes and Buffon, who, ironically, are sometimes perceived as in the lineage of the evolutionist philosophers.

The best text to cite from Voltaire is surely the short piece entitled "Bêtes" (beasts) in the original 1764 edition of the Dictionnaire philosophique, included by Tom Regan and Peter Singer in Animal Rights and Human Obligations (pp. 67-69), under the title of "A Reply to Descartes." It is unmistakably a refutation of Descartes' position, although he is not named in the article. Voltaire does not mince words, however. He denounces the poverty of spirit of those who claim that animals are machines deprived of awareness and feeling (connissance et sentiment). Descartes had argued that articulate speech constitutes the only evidence of capacity for feeling or for memory or ideas. Voltaire, in seeking to demonstrate the vacuity of this argument (really no more than an assertion) describes in detail the compelling evidence of a dog's feelings of grief, pain, and joy in the form of what present-day linguists might call "non-phatic" behavior. In refreshingly uninhibited language, he does not hesitate to describe as "barbarisms" the vivisectionists as he pictures them seizing the dog "who surpasses man so prodigiously in friendship," nailing him to a table, and cutting him up alive. "Answer me, mechanic (machiniste),

has nature arranged all the springs of feeling in this animal so that it should not feel?" (It is significant and, of course, characteristic that, while Descartes described the body as a machine made by the hands of God, Voltaire identifies the architect of creation as Nature herself, thus distancing himself from orthodox Christian theism.)

Voltaire's language is direct, clear, unambiguous, and forceful. He appeals to the reader's common sense and to his personal observations and experience of life. He addressed the unnamed Descartes and those who think as he does directly with the familiar tu, abolishing distance and formality and creating, as it were, the illusion of dialogue and, with it, life and movement. Lastly, he does not dissociate theory and practice, as a more timid writer might. The Cartesian to whom he appeals is not an idle armchair theorist, whose intellectual constructions are divorced from concrete reality, from the active, lived experience. No! He himself is putting the ideas into practice, which, indeed, is inseparable from the theory that has been concocted to legitimize it. This practice is being imposed, brutally and inhumanely, upon the animal Voltaire represents as being like ourselves. In him, he declares, "there are the same organs of feeling as there are in thyself (dans toi)."
The contradiction in the Cartesian's theory, which would be harmless and without consequence if it could be contained at that level, has now become, in the Cartesian's action, a monstrous contradiction of his own humanity. Moreover, by asserting the dog's demonstration of friendship and love, a high level of social relationship that the anthropocentric Cartesian would reserve for human beings alone, Voltaire demolishes the Cartesian's claim of moral superiority and establishes the contrary, the animal's superiority, not in the mode of an allegorical fable, but as literal fact, made apparent by this confrontation of the dog's loving behavior and the Cartesian's insensitive brutality.

There are in this brief article of Voltaire's some further words on the question of the souls of animals. Are they substantial forms, as Aristotle and Christian theologians maintained? Or are their souls material? These pages may interest us less as a commentary on Voltaire's conception of our relation to animals and our obligations toward them. They are, however, revelatory of his impa-

tience with what he considered futile metaphysical questions and the kind of vaporous mentality he associated with them. He also uses the question to reassert the attribution of feeling, memory, and thought (limited, perhaps, to "a certain number of ideas") by the same supreme being who makes grass grow and subjected the earth to the sun's gravitational force, thus reminding his readers of his preference for Newton above Aristotle and Descartes, as a true ideologist of the Enlightenment.

This part of Voltaire's article is also related in its thrust to other texts that he put together on the subject of the soul, which he always took great pleasure in demystifying. In one of them, which appeared a few years later (in Questions sur l'Encyclopedie, 1770), he repeated elements of the article we have been discussing, but with the difference that Descartes is named and that what he calls "the strange system which supposes animals to be pure machines without any sensation" is identified as Descartes' "chimera." (See "De l'Ame des Betes" ["On Animals' Souls"] in Dictionnaire philosophique, Notes, pp. 428-9.) As usual, ridicule and irony are his weapons as he mocks Descartes' unprecedented "abuse of the gift of reasoning" with his curious assumption that nature gave animals all of our organs of feeling in order that they might be totally deprived of feeling! Doubtless, this was not quite the way Descartes had put it, but the lurid clarity of Voltaire's way of spelling out the grotesque implication of the Cartesian argument effectively causes it to dissolve in absurdity, as his reader dissolves in laughter, a technique that Voltaire raised to the level of high art in Candide and many other pieces of philosophical fiction.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau was as much a man of the Enlightenment as Voltaire, although that can be obscured by the fact that they came to detest each other and by Rousseau's progressive isolation from the other mainstream philosophes. When Rousseau writes of animals, it is in a very different voice from Voltaire's, but it is all the more striking that so much of their approach to the question should be based on the same underlying concerns. Most important, perhaps, is that, like Voltaire, Rousseau attached great impor-

tance to our fellow animals' capacity for feeling and through this to their kinship with us.

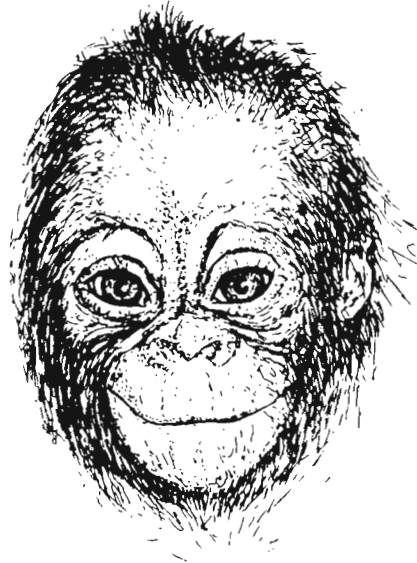
Banal as it is to say, one cannot overstate the importance Rousseau attached to sentiment. For him (as for other "pre-romantics" of the eighteenth century) the capacity for feeling deeply was a fatal gift, a guaranty of pain, but also of moral value. (That gift, rather than learning or physical beauty, was what attracted the heroine of Rousseau's novel, The New Heloise, to her young tutor.) in the Emile, Rousseau's chronicle of a child's development into adulthood, he conducts the boy into adolescence, the passion and moral awakening of which are associated more than anything else with the revelations of deep feeling. The child Emile had, of course, felt pleasure and pain, but, like other children, had remained indifferent to what was outside of himself. It is in the birth of pity, experienced through the cries and convulsions of a dying animal that the child becomes a man. This is what Rousseau calls his first "relative" feeling:

To become sensitive and capable of pity, the child must know that there are beings like himself who suffer what he has suffered. . . . In fact, how are we to allow ourselves to be moved by pity unless it is by escaping from ourselves and identifying ourselves with the suffering animal by taking leave, so to speak, of our own being in order to assume his? (Emile, Book IV, p. 261.)

It is surely significant that Rousseau chose the spectacle of the death throes of an animal as the event to awaken in his young pupil a sense of kinship with others than himself so that the emotion of pity may be born. He recognized that not all human beings are moved deeply by the suffering of animals and speculated on why it is that we can be more hardened to their pain than to that of other human beings, despite the fact that the sensitivity that we share in common ought to identify us equally with them. One cause, he believed, is the supposition that animals are less endowed with either memory (of past suffering) or imagination (of the future) than we are. And, thus, the animal's suffering is judged more limited than the presumably more complex person's.

Rousseau uses this distinction that people are accustomed to draw between themselves and animals to develop an analogy with distinctions people make among themselves: "By extension we become hardened in the same way toward the lot of some men, and the rich console themselves for the harm they do to the poor by supposing that they are stupid enough not to feel it" (pp. 264-5). In this way, Rousseau almost slyly insinuates an accusation of social injustice with the casuistic justification by the rich of their wrongdoing into his argument about animals, thus putting human apologetics for their mistreatment in the same perspective and also inviting redress for animals as a parallel to the struggle for human rights on the part of the impoverished mass of people.

Rousseau's development of this analogy strikes at assumptions that have been made throughout history. Aristotle, for example, cast doubts upon the humanity of slaves. in



the enlightened nineteenth century, it was commonly assumed that working class men and women lacked the sensitivity of the monied classes and suffered less from hunger, cold, and other deprivations. Nietzsche, in a curious passage of his On the Genealogy of Morals, declared his solemn conviction that Blacks ("taken as representatives of prehistoric man") can endure pain "that would drive even the best constituted European to distraction." In a truly extraordinary sentence, even for Nietzsche, he elaborated on

this by no means uncommon idea that both animals and the lower orders of the human species are relatively insensitive to pain:

The curve of human susceptibility to pain seems in fact to take an extraordinary and almost sudden drop as soon as one has passed the upper ten thousand or ten million of the top stratum of culture; and for my own part, I have no doubt that the combined suffering of all the animals ever subjected to the knife for scientific ends is utterly negligible compared with one painful night of a single hysterical bluestocking. (On the Genealogy of Morals, Second Essay, Section VII.)

Words like these demonstrate the sadly inescapable fact that the brilliant Nietzsche, capable of truly radical thought, was as much a prey to ignorant superstition as the most benighted of his contemporaries. We may, of course, agree that people whose bodies have been softened by inactivity and comfort may feel the sudden imposition of pain more acutely than those who have had to accustom themselves to hardship. But Rousseau's perception of the combination of bad faith and prejudice in the rich person's lulling of his conscience and of the analogous way in which men make little of animals' suffering seems far more penetrating than Nietzsche's wild thrashing, in which he takes on not only animals but also African Blacks, intellectual women, and all the impoverished masses unfortunate enough to be born below the top "stratum" of European society.

The argument in Rousseau's Emile is readily relatable to passages in other writings of his in which, for reasons both personal and philosophical, he attacks the inequalities that have developed in human society. Probably the most significant of these is the second discourse of 1754 on the origins of inequality among men. In the preface to that work, attentive as always to the importance of the pre-rational, he had identified two "principles:" an ardent preoccupation with our own well-being and self-preservation and "a natural repugnance to see any sensitive being and principally those of our own kind (nos semblables) perish or suffer" (Garnier-Flammarion edition, p. 153). An inner impulse of commiseration (assimilable to the pity born in the fourth book of

the Emile) will agitate on behalf of our never harming another man "or even any sensitive being (aucun etre sensible)."

For Rousseau, this settles the ancient disputes on participation by animals in natural law:

For it is clear that, deprived of intellect and of freedom, they cannot recognize [natural law]; but, since they share something of our nature through the sensitivity with which they are endowed, one will judge that they too ought to participate in natural right and that man is subject to some sort of duties toward them. It seems, in fact, that, if I am obliged to do no harm to my fellow man [mon semblable], it is less because he is a reasonable being than because he is a sensitive being; a quality that, being common to beast and man, ought at least to give the one the right not to be uselessly mistreated by the other (Ibid.).

We must, of course, recognize that, despite his heretical deviations from both Catholic and Calvinist dogma of his time, Rousseau was less estranged from theological conceptions than Voltaire and was, therefore, more disposed to deny animals both reason and freedom. Nevertheless, there are at least two radical elements in this statement of his. One is that animals have rights. Moreover, the right Rousseau enunciates (not to be mistreated by men) is conceived on the model of eighteenth century human rights in the sense that it is a defensive right, a right that limits the freedom of the oppressor to have his way with the victim. More than an "enabling" right for the individual for whom the right is proclaimed, it is a "privative" curbing of previously uninhibited powers of authority. The fact that Rousseau sees things this way is in itself a great leap forward, even though he is willing to limit the forbidden mistreatment to what is "useless."

The second radical element of Rousseau's argument is his displacement of intelligence or rationality as a qualification for animal rights or human obligations toward them. Jeremy Bentham will write just a few decades later in words that sound like a crisp, condensed echo of Rousseau's: "The Question is

not, Can they reason? nor, Can they talk [as Descartes had held]? but, Can they suffer?" (From The Principles of Morals and Legislation, 1789, quoted by Regan and Singer, op. cit., p. 130.)

As a matter of fact, declarations of rights for human beings have not claimed them only for conspicuously rational members of the species. The American Declaration of Independence declared all men equal and claimed rights for them all (even conceivably including by implication future liberation for women and slaves). One after the other, exploited and oppressed groups have asserted and struggled for rights, winning them to some extent, no doubt, through the exercise of tactical intelligence, but without relying on a stipulation of intellect as a requirement for acquisition of the rights in question. On the other hand, the denial of rights has frequently been justified (even very recently by amateur geneticists in the United States, for example) by a claim of intellectual inferiority.

For Rousseau, this displacement is all the more significant because of his acknowledgement of man's intellectual superiority. He believed that for animals instinct is the motive force behind choice and action--perhaps, a bit as some biologists today believe it is the encoded message on a genetic "tape" that has replaced the stars in arbitrating human destiny--whereas man decides (in almost Sartrean terms) through an act of freedom. As often, the distinctions are somewhat murky. Rousseau seems to follow Descartes when he sees in the animal "an ingenious machine;" but then he also speaks of the "human machine," and the contrast is no longer absolute. The animal lacks intellect (lumiere), but it is capable of conceiving "ideas," "because it has senses," and it is also capable of combining ideas. Proof, if we did not have enough of it from other sources, that Rousseau had read John Locke. But, here he is applying Locke's notions on human understanding to mindless animals!

One might see in these apparently contradictory positions a sign of the awkward dilemma Rousseau and other philosophers confront when they have inherited moral reservations about admitting their close kinship with animals and yet are prevented by their own honesty from denying totally what observation has taught them. Rousseau seems to arrive at an amalgam of concepts in which he

cannot refrain from formulating differences that he has been led to believe must be essential but stops short of permitting the conception of those differences to legitimize inflicting pain on animals, and, on the other hand, he clings to a perception of our kinship with animals as sensitive beings and to our common right to have rights in self-defense against oppression.

The line of perceived kinship leads Rousseau to defending the practice of vegetarianism (Origins of Inequality, p. 163). He finds that the structure of human teeth and intestines puts us among the fruit-eaters (les frugivores). This, he suggests, is evidence that, in the state of nature from which man has fallen, he lived (contrary to Hobbes' grimmer view) in peace with his fellow creatures. It is the flesh-eating animals that engage in combat for their prey, whereas vegetarians co-exist in perpetual peace, as humankind might have if we had remained fruit-eaters and never left the idyllic state of nature. Thus does Rousseau integrate the myth of a lost paradise where we were innocent and happy with a serious critique of the physical exploitation of animals. In abandoning the bloodless diet of fruits and vegetables, man symbolically forsook peaceful relations with his fellow creatures on earth, cast the die for survival through killing, and thus added violence toward other animals to the other manifestations of moral degradation that Rousseau associated with the historical evolution of human society.

Although neither Rousseau nor Voltaire may have achieved in its totality that "deliberate recognition" of animals' rights that Henry Salt situated in the age of enlightenment and sensibility, their part in preparing a climate favorable to it is at least as important as Salt believed it was. Both of them rejected the absolute condemnation of animals to treatment as objects of insentient matter. Both, in their different styles, argued for our acceptance of animals as fellow creatures, capable of thought and, above all, of feeling. Both wrote in an era that voiced its horror of violence, of war, of persecution, and of ignorant superstition and intolerance. Like Kant, both would have

continued on page 24

troying the happiness of others. Thus, R2 is at odds with both of our primary moral concerns, justice and happiness. Consequently, neither premise of the pro-researcher argument is morally justified.

Conclusion

The pro-animal argument, which would prohibit all research with animals, is unsound, but so is the pro-researcher argument, which would permit any experiment on animals which might benefit humans. The reasons against these arguments suggest the following positive conclusions:

(i) Fundamentally, there should be just one set of moral principles concerning research, rather than one set for experiments on humans and another, weaker set for experiments on non-humans.

(ii) Experimental sacrifices must be limited to situations in which there is a clear and present opportunity for making the world a happier place and must be made according to principles which insure that the sacrifices are borne fairly by all those likely to benefit from the experiment.

If these principles were adopted and enforced, the abuses of animals which concern proponents of the pro-animal argument could be eliminated without compromising the prospect of continued advances in knowledge which concern proponents of the pro-researcher argument.

continued from page 9

an end in itself, although when Kant, alas, approved an ethic forbidding utilization of a sentient creature as an object rather than as declared that "man can have no duty to any beings except human," what we know of both Voltaire and Rousseau suggests very strongly that at that point they would have parted company with this all too humanistic philosopher and, like Schopenhauer, have found that proposition "revolting and abominable."

EDITIONS CONSULTED

Friedrich Nietzsche, On the Genealogy of Morals (New York: Vintage Books, 1969).

Tom Regan and Peter Singer, Animal Rights and Human Obligations (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1976).

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Emile (1762) (Paris: Garnier, 1957).

_____, Discours sur l'origine de l'inegalite (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1971).

Henry S. Salt, Animals' Rights (Clarks Summit: Society for Animal Rights, 1980).

Voltaire, Dictionnaire philosophique (Paris: Garnier, 1954).

SUBSCRIPTION INFORMATION

BETWEEN THE SPECIES is available at a special introductory price through Christmas 1984.

Inaugural Issue: \$2.00

Introductory Subscription: \$10.00

After Christmas 1984 the single copy newsstand price will be \$3.

The regular subscription price is \$12.

Orders for subscriptions or single copies should be sent accompanied by a check to

Schweitzer Center
San Francisco Bay Institute

PO 254, Berkeley, CA 94701, USA