ANIMAL LIBERATION: A PERSONAL VIEW

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I arrived in Oxford in October, 1969. I had come to do a graduate degree in philosophy--the natural climax to the education of an Australian philosophy student preparing for an academic career. My interests were in ethics and political philosophy, but the connections between my philosophical studies and my everyday life would have been hard to discern. My day to day existence and my ethical beliefs were much like those of other students. I had no distinctive views about animals nor about the ethics of our treatment

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of them. Like most people, I disapproved of cruelty to animals, but I was not greatly concerned about it. I assumed that the R.S.P.C.A. and the government could be relied upon to see that cruelty to animals was an isolated occurrence. I thought of vegetarians as, at best, other-worldly idealists and, at worst, cranks. Animal welfare I regarded as a cause for kindly old ladies rather than for serious political reformers.

The crack in my complacency about our relations with animals began in 1970 when I met Richard Keshen. Our meeting was entirely accidental. Richard, a Canadian, was also a graduate student in philosophy. He and I were attending lectures given by Jonathan Glover on free will, determinism, and moral responsibility. They were stimulating lectures, and when they finished a few students often remained behind to ask questions or to discuss points with the lecturer. After one particular lecture, Richard and I were among this small group; when Glover had answered our queries, we walked out together, discussing the issue further. It was lunchtime, and Richard suggested that we go to his college, Balliol, and continue our conversation over lunch. When it came to selecting our meal, I noticed that Richard asked if the spaghetti sauce had meat in it and, when told that it had, took a meatless salad. So, when we had talked enough about free will and determinism, I asked Richard why he had avoided meat. That began a discussion that was to change my life.

The change did not take place immediately. What Richard Keshen told me about the treatment of farm animals, combined with his arguments against our neglect of the interests of animals, gave me a lot to think about, but I was not about to change my diet overnight. Over the next two months, together with my wife, Renata, I met Richard's wife, Mary, and the two other Canadian philosophy students, Roslind and Stanley Godlovitch, who had been responsible for Richard and Mary becoming vegetarians. Ros and Stan had become vegetarians a year or two earlier, before reaching Oxford. They had come to see our treatment of non-human animals as analogous to the brutal exploitation of other races by whites in earlier centuries. This analogy they now urged on us, challenging us to find a morally relevant distinction between humans and non-humans which could justify the differences we make in our treatment of those who belong to our own species and

those who do not.

During these two months, Renata and I read Ruth Harrison's pioneering attack on factory farming, Animal Machines. I also read an article which Ros Godlovitch had recently published in the academic journal Philosophy. She was in the process of revising it for re-publication in a book which she, Stan, and John Harris, another vegetarian philosophy student at Oxford, were editing. Ros was a little unsure about the revisions she was making, and I spent a lot of time trying to help her clarify and strengthen her arguments. In the end, she went her own way, and I don't think any of my suggestions were incorporated into the revised version of the article as it appeared in Animals, Men and Morals--but in the process of putting her arguments in their strongest possible form, I had convinced myself that the logic of the vegetarian position was irrefutable. Renata and I decided that if we were to retain our self-respect and to continue to take moral issues seriously, we should cease to eat animals.

Through the Kershens and the Godlovitches, we got to know other members of a loose group of vegetarians. Several of them lived together in a rambling old house with a huge vegetable garden. Among the residents of this semi-communal establishment were John Harris and two other contributors to Animals, Men and Morals, David Wood and Michael Peters. Philosophically, we agreed on little but the immorality of our present treatment of animals. David Wood was interested in Continental philosophy, Michael Peters in Marxism and structuralism, Richard Keshen's favorite philosopher was Spinoza, Ros Godlovitch was still developing her basic position--she had not studied philosophy as an undergraduate and only became involved in it as a result of her interest in the ethics of our relations with animals--and Stan Godlovitch refused to work on moral philosophy, restricting himself to the philosophy of biology. I was more in the mainstream of Anglo-American philosophy than any of the others, and in moral philosophy I took a much more utilitarian line than they did.

Also around Oxford at this time were Richard Ryder, Andrew Linzey, and Stephen Clark. Richard Ryder was working at the Nuffield Hospital in Oxford. He had written a leaflet on "Speciesism"--the first use of the term, as far as I know--and now was

writing an essay on animal experimentation for Animals, Men and Morals. Later, he developed this work into his splendid attack on animal experimentation, Victims of Science. He was also organizing a "ginger group" within the R.S.P.C.A., with the aim of getting that then extremely conservative body to eject its fox-hunters and take a stronger stance on other issues. That seemed a very long shot, then. I was introduced to Richard Ryder through Ros Godlovitch, and from him I learnt a lot about animal experimentation. At the time, our positions were the mirror image of each other--I was a vegetarian but not a strong opponent of animal experimentation, because I naively thought most experiments were necessary to save lives and were, therefore, justified on utilitarian grounds. Richard Ryder, on the other hand, was not then a vegetarian but was opposed to animal experimentation, because of the extreme suffering it often involved.

Andrew Linzey was interested in the animal issue from the point of view of Christian theology, which was not the concern of most of the group, for we were a non-religious lot. His book, Animal Rights, was published by the SCM Press in 1976. Stephen Clark was a Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford, during this period, but I did not get to know him until much later, after he had written The Moral Status of Animals, which appeared in 1977.

Animals, Men and Morals, the first of all these books, appeared in 1971. We had great hopes for it, for it demanded revolutionary change in our attitudes to and treatment of non-human animals. I think Ros Godlovitch, especially, thought that the book might trigger a widespread protest movement. In the light of these expectations, the book's reception was profoundly disappointing. The major newspapers and weeklies ignored it. In the Sunday Times, for example, it was mentioned only in the "In Brief" column--just one short paragraph of exposition, without a comment. Our ideas seemed to be too radical to be taken seriously by the staid British press.

At the time, the virtual silence which met the British publication of Animals, Men and Morals seemed a severe setback. Yet, it turned out to be the first of a chain of events that led me to write Animal Liberation. Some time after Animals, Men and Morals appeared in England, the Godlovitches got

some better news: Taplinger had agreed to publish an American edition. But would the book get more attention in America than in Britain? I determined to do my best to see that it did. I had, in any case, been wanting to write something to make people more aware of the injustice of our treatment of animals but had been deterred from doing so by the feeling that since so many of my ideas had come from others, and especially from Ros, I should allow her to publish them. Now, I thought of a way to satisfy my own desire to do something to make people aware of the issue while at the same time helping to get my friends' ideas the attention they deserved but had not received. I would write a long review-article, based on Animals, Men and Morals but drawing the views of the several contributors together into a single coherent philosophy of Animal Liberation. There was only one place I knew of in America where such a review-article might appear: The New York Review of Books.

I wrote to the editors of the New York Review, describing the book and the review I would write. I did not know what answer to expect, since I had had no previous contact with them, and they would never have heard of me. I knew that they were open to novel and radical ideas, but did they, perhaps, accept contributions only from people they knew? Would the idea of animal liberation seem ridiculous to them?

Robert Silvers' reply was guardedly encouraging. The idea was intriguing, and he would like to see the article, though he could not promise to publish it. That was all the encouragement I needed, however, and the article was soon written and accepted. Entitled "Animal Liberation," it appeared in April, 1973. I was soon receiving enthusiastic letters from people who seemed to have been waiting for their feelings about the mistreatment of animals to be given a coherent philosophical backing.

Among the letters was one from a leading New York publisher, who suggested that I develop the ideas sketched in the article into a full-length book. Although my review had helped Animals, Men and Morals become better known in America--it eventually went into a paperback edition there, something that never happened in Britain--there was obviously room for a different kind of book, more systematic in its approach than a compilation of articles by different authors can

be. There was also need for factual research to be done on factory farming and experimentation in America, since the data in both Animal Machines and Animals, Men and Morals was largely British. By this time, I knew that I would soon be leaving Oxford, for I had accepted a visiting position at New York University, which would make a good base for this kind of research. So, during our last summer in Oxford, I began work on Animal Liberation.

I arrived in New York in September, 1973, with an outline of the book and the drafts of what were to become the first chapter--which contains the core of the ethical argument--and the historical chapter which outlines the development of speciesism in Western thought. But there had been a change of personnel at the New York publisher who had suggested the book, and they were no longer interested. Fortunately, Robert Silvers suggested that the New York Review might publish the book--they had done one or two others which had grown out of articles they had first published, and Silvers was personally very supportive of the idea of animal liberation. While teaching at New York University, I spent as much time as I could on the book, and when my visiting appointment ended in June, I began to work on it full-time, spending many of my days either at the New York Public Library reading farming magazines, or at the offices of United Action for Animals going through the extensive files on animal experimentation which the late Eleanor Seiling was happy to make available to me. The book was finished by Christmas, just before we left New York to return to Australia.

Animal Liberation was not an immediate success. It got some good reviews, as well as some silly ones, and it sold steadily but not spectacularly. Some of the leading philosophical journals devoted special issues to the topic, which was gratifying. Nevertheless, my highest hopes--naive ones, perhaps--were not fulfilled. The book did not spark an immediate upsurge against factory farming and animal experimentation. The only prompt political effect was that Congressman Ed Koch, as he then was, referred to the book in a speech in which he proposed a National Commission of Inquiry into animal welfare matters. But his proposal lapsed, and for a few years it seemed that the only effect the book was having was to put the question of animals and ethics onto the list of topics

discussed in applied ethics courses in university philosophy departments.

At the time, it was impossible to detect--at least from my distant vantage point in Australia--how the animal liberation movement was gradually gathering force in Britain and the United States. It is really only in the past five years that the animal liberation movement has made real gains. I am not sure why this is so, except that there has been a lot of hard work by some very dedicated people. Five years ago, the public in most developed countries was largely unaware of the nature of modern intensive animal rearing. Now, in Britain, in West Germany, in Scandinavia, in the Netherlands, and in Australia, a large body of informed opinion is

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opposed to the confinement of laying hens in small wire cages, and of pigs and calves in stalls so small that they cannot walk a single step or even turn around. In Britain, a House of Commons Agriculture Committee has recommended that cages for laying hens be phased out. Switzerland has gone one better, actually passing legislation which will get

rid of the cages by 1992. A West German court pronounced the cage system contrary to the country's anti-cruelty legislation, and although the government found a way of rendering the court's verdict ineffective, the West German state of Hesse recently announced that it would follow Switzerland's example and begin to phase the cages out. Perhaps the most positive step forward for British farm animals has been in the worst of all forms of factory farming, the so-called "white veal trade." Veal calves were standardly kept in darkness for 22 hours a day, in individual stalls too small for them to turn around. They had no straw to lie on--for fear that by chewing it, they would cause their flesh to lose its pale softness--and were fed on a diet deliberately made deficient in iron, so that the flesh would remain pale and fetch the highest possible price in the gourmet restaurant trade. A campaign against the trade led to a widespread consumer boycott. As a result, Britain's largest veal producer conceded the need for change and moved its calves out of their bare, wooden, five feet by two feet stalls into group pens with room to move and straw for bedding.

There have also been important gains in the area of animal experimentation. In contrast to the situation with factory farming, these have occurred mostly in the United States. The first success came in 1976, in a campaign against the American Museum of Natural History. The museum was selected as a target because it was conducting a particularly pointless series of experiments which involved mutilating cats to investigate the effect this had on their sex lives. In June, 1976, animal liberation activists began picketing the museum, writing letters, advertising and gathering support. They kept it up until, in December, 1977, it was announced that the experiments would no longer be funded.

This victory may have saved no more than sixty cats from painful experimentation, but it had shown that a well-planned, well-run campaign can prevent scientists doing as they please with laboratory animals. Henry Spira, the New York ex-merchant seaman, ex-civil rights activist who had led the campaign against the museum, used the victory as a stepping-stone to bigger campaigns. He now runs two coalitions of animal groups, focusing on the rabbit-blinding Draize eye test and on the LD50, a crude, fifty year old

toxicity test designed to find the Lethal Dose for 50% of a sample of animals. Together, these tests inflict suffering and distress on more than five million animals yearly in the United States alone.

Already the coalitions have begun to reduce both the number of animals used and the severity of their suffering. U.S. government agencies have responded to the campaign against the Draize test by moving to curb some of the most blatant cruelties. They declared that substances known to be caustic irritants, such as lye, ammonia, and oven cleaners, need not be re-tested on the eyes of conscious rabbits. If this seems too obvious to need saying by a government agency, that merely indicates how bad things were until the campaign began. The agencies have also reduced by one-half to one-third the suggested number of rabbits needed per test for other products. Two major companies, Procter and Gamble and Smith, Kline, and French, have released programs for improving their toxicology tests which should involve substantially less suffering for animals. Another company, Avon, reported a decline of 33% in the number of animals it uses.

In the most recent, and potentially most significant, breakthrough, the United States Food and Drug Administration has announced that it does not require the LD50. At a stroke, corporations developing new products have been deprived of their standard excuse for using the LD50--the claim that the FDA forces them to do the test if the products are to be released onto the American market.

The same five years which have seen the gains I have mentioned have also seen a steady rise in militancy in the movement. In Britain, Canada, France, West Germany, Italy, and Australia, animals have been released and laboratories have been damaged. The U.S. Animal Liberation Front gained national publicity in May, 1984, when its members entered the laboratory of Dr. Thomas Gennarelli at the University of Pennsylvania, damaged equipment and took a number of videotapes. The videotapes, sections of which were subsequently shown on television, show severe head injuries being inflicted on monkeys. Injured monkeys, their limbs flapping uncontrollably, are tied to chairs while experimenters try to get them to respond. On the videotapes, the research team jokes about the monkeys' injuries, and Dr. Genarelli refers to the animals as "suckers." In July, 1985, the U.S.

Department of Health and Human Services announced that its own inquiry into the laboratory had shown serious deficiencies in animal care and funding for the laboratory was suspended. Another raid at the City of Hope research laboratory in Duarte, California, also led to an inquiry which stopped experiments at the laboratory.

The research community is understandably alarmed. Many laboratories have increased their security arrangement, but this is a costly business, and money spent on fences and guards is presumably not then available for research--which is just what the animal liberation activists want. To guard every factory farm would be even more expensive. No wonder that some of those who experiment on animals or raise them for food hope that animal liberation will just prove to be a passing fad.

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That hope is bound to be disappointed. The animal liberation movement is here to stay. It has been building steadily now for more than a decade. There is wide public support for the view that we are not justified in treating animals as mere things to be used for whatever purposes we find convenient, whether it be the entertainment of the hunt or as a laboratory tool for the testing of some new food coloring.

But there is still the question of the course the movement will take. Within the animal liberation movement, some forms of direct action have widespread support. Provided there is no violence against any animal, human or non-human, many activists believe that releasing animals from situations

in which they are wrongly made to suffer--and finding good homes for them--is justified. They liken it to the illegal underground railroad which assisted black slaves to make their way to freedom. It is, they say, the only possible means of helping the victims of oppression.

In the worst cases of indefensible experiments, this argument is strong, but there is another question that should be asked by everyone interested not only in the immediate release of ten, or fifty, or a hundred animals, but in the prospects of a change that affects millions of animals. Is direct action effective as a tactic? Does it simply polarize the debate and harden the opposition to reform? So far, one would have to say, the publicity gained--and the evident public sympathy with the animals released--has done the movement more good than harm. This is, in large part, because the targets of these operations have been so well selected that the experimentation revealed is particularly difficult to defend.

Recently, this crucial matter of selecting only the most blatantly indefensible targets has not always been as strictly observed as it should have been. The groundswell of militant activity has increased, and some activists have gone beyond actions directed at releasing animals or documenting cruelty. In 1982, a group calling itself the "Animal Rights Militia" sent letter-bombs to Margaret Thatcher. The group had never been heard of before, has never been heard of since, and may not have been a genuine animal rights organization at all. But that is, of course, exactly the kind of activity which must be avoided, not only because it is disastrous as a tactic, but also because it is ethically indefensible in itself.

There are circumstances in which, even in a democracy, it is morally right to disobey the law, and the issue of animal liberation provides good examples of such circumstances. If the democratic process is not functioning properly, if repeated opinion polls confirm that an overwhelming majority opposes many types of experimentation, and yet the government takes no effective action to stop them, if the public is kept largely unaware of what is happening in factory farms and laboratories, then illegal actions may be the only available avenue for assisting animals and obtaining evidence about what is happening. My concern is not with breaking

the law as such; it is with the prospect of the confrontation becoming violent and leading to a climate of polarization in which reasoning becomes impossible and the animals themselves end up being the victims. Polarization between animal liberation activists, on the one hand, and the factory farmers and at least some of the animal experimenters, on the other hand, may be unavoidable. But actions which involve the general public or violent actions which lead to people getting hurt would antagonize the community as a whole.

It is vital that the animal liberation movement avoid the vicious spiral of violence. Animal liberation activists must set themselves irrevocably against the use of violence, even when their opponents use violence against them. It is easy to believe that because some experimenters make animals suffer, it is all right to make the experimenters suffer. This attitude is mistaken. We may be convinced that people who abuse animals are totally callous and insensitive, but we lower ourselves to their level and put ourselves in the wrong if we harm or threaten to harm that person. The entire animal liberation movement is based on the strength of its ethical concern. It must not abandon the high moral ground.

Instead of going down the same blind alley of violence and counter-violence, the animal liberation movement should follow the examples of the two greatest--and, not coincidentally, most successful--leaders of liberation movements in modern times: Gandhi and Martin Luther King. With immense courage and resolution, they stuck to the principle of non-violence despite the provocations and often violent attacks of their opponents. In the end, they succeeded because the justice of their cause could not be denied and because their behavior touched the consciences even of those who had opposed them. The struggle to extend the sphere of moral concern to non-human animals may be even harder and longer, but if it is pursued with the same determination and moral resolve, it will surely also succeed.

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