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# Commentary

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As the debate about the treatment of animals rages ever more loudly about us, we would do well to take some time and examine the dialectical enquiry which has gone before and how such an experience has given rise to our contemporary framework. The enterprise of moral clarification and advancement does not start from a set of clearly defined and neatly articulated concepts which are imposed on lived experience. Rather, the experience of lived life indicates conceptual structures which are often inadequate and need some revision. Progress in such a dialectic is measured by the ability of newly developed standards to incorporate previous moments and to offer further conceptual clarity and coherence.

"Kindness to All Around" is just the vehicle for such an examination of this dialectical process. The fundamental premise of this study suggests that popular attitudes, whether expressed in the nursery, from the pulpit, or in popular literature, not only begin to articulate the conceptual framework for nineteenth century moral norms (as well as our own dependence on such a framework) but are sufficiently fluid to suggest continuous refinement. At the same time we must keep in mind the point, very well expressed in Grier's paper, that popular sentiments and attitudes have very real limitations. Popular culture, while reflecting the moral pulse of a people or a nation can, at times, be blind to rather glaring tensions and contradictions. These tensions would seem to indicate that moral development, at best, is an uneven process of clarification. With both these advantages and drawbacks inherent in expressions of popular culture clearly



## DISCUSSION

understood, I would like to take this opportunity for commentary to sketch an outline of three themes which seem to be woven through a nineteenth century ethics of kindness and which exemplify this give and take found in dialectical moral inquiry. The first of these themes is the hierarchical framework in which animal/human relations are often considered and the related notion of stewardship.

The hierarchical ladder placing humans in a position of advantage over the environment—environment here understood as any nonhuman resource, including all species of animals—is certainly one of the most dominant paradigms. With this stark hierarchical view the environment is seen as a tool designed solely for the use of humans. As discussed in the Second Section of Grier's paper, the harsh hierarchical view was tempered somewhat by the development of the idea of stewardship. With the paradigm of stewardship came the recognition that great power entails great responsibility. The one who is able to alter the conditions of another must exercise such advantage with great care. This reality was recognized in Horace Hooker's *The Child's Book on the Sabbath*, in which he states:

Beasts that labor all week need rest as well as man. And as the poor, patient ox has no voice to urge his claim, God wrote it down in the commandment, that oxen have a right to rest on the Sabbath. Beware how you deprive them of this right, for God takes the part of the weak against the oppressor...

Hooker clearly accepts the hierarchical relationship between humans and animals; they exist to serve our needs. Yet at the same time, the very advantage which gives humans the position of authority carries a responsibility. We must take great care to act for the welfare of those in our power. With Hooker, we see the animal moving out of the conceptual framework which places it completely in the service of our needs and into a position in which the animal is still a beast of burden but at the same time is given some independent moral standing. The tensions in this conceptual middle ground will become clearer as other dominant themes of the nineteenth century view of animals are developed.

The second theme to discuss is the role of animals in the moral development of children. The belief that individual character is formed by means of habitual action has been a mainstay of the history of moral

thought from the works of Plato onward. In the nineteenth century this attitude seemed to be expressed in the conviction that certain social virtues, such as benevolence and kindness (central to a concept of stewardship), were to be fostered in childhood if the individual was going to be a productive member of society. That is, if children were to learn such social virtues in a small way early on, such as with animals, perhaps he or she would then express these virtues in human relations later in life. As with Hooker's ox, animals have a clear service role to play in the moral education of children. Better children should practice their virtues, and make the inevitable mistakes, with animals than they should make such mistakes later on with more important relations, that is, relations with people. This role of animals as a tool in moral education may be seen in the story of *Master Henry's Rabbit*.

Henry, who is the sole caretaker of a wounded rabbit, is diverted and neglects to feed the creature. For this neglect, he is punished by his uncle:

"You are greatly to blame, Henry," said Mr. Dalben. "You would have done better, to have destroyed the little creature at once when you found it in the warren, than to keep it to perish with hunger. Go, careless boy, feed your poor rabbit now; and, in order that you may be able to feel for the poor little animal another time, I shall deprive you of your dinner today."

The community of animals became a sort of proto-society in which children could learn the responsibilities of stewardship and kindness. This brings up the final theme which I shall discuss briefly, namely, the incorporation of animals into the domestic sphere.

As domestic animals became more a part of the nineteenth century household, their qualities and characteristics were increasingly seen as similar to humans. This was a feature which made them so useful for the education of children: the animal would visibly suffer when neglected, show anger when injured, gratitude when treated with kindness, and so on. Furthermore, as "Kindness to All Around" indicates, the nineteenth century family began to see their pets as one more member of the family: they took photographs of the pet, brought the animal on family outings, and buried him when he died. In this context they began to bestow upon the creature a certain metaphorical personhood. It would seem that the personhood of the

pet was metaphorical since the animal was treated as a person only in a limited context. Outside of that context the animal was returned to a clearly subordinate level on the hierarchy. For example, popular attitudes seem much more comfortable with the destruction of an unwanted kitten than they would be with the destruction of an unwanted human. Animals were seen as holding some independent moral station as a sort of person, but this in no way entailed the full incorporation of the animal into the family as an equal.

In conclusion, it seems clear from the cases of the oxen on the Sabbath, and Master Henry and his rabbit, as well as other like situations, that our understanding of animals developed to include them more fully in the moral and domestic circle. But this incorporation did not eliminate their role as tool and servant to be used and disposed of at the convenience of the human community.

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