

Animal Rights - A Test of Civilisation

by Francisco Martin

For as long as Man continues to be the ruthless destroyer of the lower living beings, he will never know health or peace. For as long as men massacre animals, they will kill each other. Indeed, he who sows the seeds of murder and pain cannot reap joy and love.

Twenty-five centuries ago Pythagoras, founder of an ascetic vegetarian communal religious order, started to argue the case against the entrenched meat-eating mythology on behalf of non-human animals, hoping to end the callous and misguided ways of his contemporaries. Yet to this day, ignorance, tradition and greed prevail over justice and common sense. As a result, millions of sentient beings lead short, miserable lives, while our own health and quality of life is threatened.

In today's factory farms countless millions of animals are destined to face unimaginable horrors where their sickly bodies acquire the paltry monetary value assigned to them. They cannot escape their fate because human beings lack the imagination to grasp the horror of this senseless exploitation. The struggle for justice requires determination and sincere motivation to bring about social change that will rid us of our ignorance and animals of their chains. The fate of animals is the crystal ball in which we see the reflection of our own destiny, and the way we shape their future will also determine the nature and scope of the path for us to follow. The struggle for animal rights is also an affirmation of our identity, as rejection of violence will help us to re-evaluate our lives and goals in harmony with nature and thus guarantee the future of the planet.

What could possibly justify any form of animal exploitation? Who can watch the innocent victim of a bullfight or other blood sport die from deliberately inflicted wounds and yet regard themselves as civilised? What validity have religious beliefs which brand other beings as lower or lesser creatures? How can we eat what was once living flesh and yet speak of

healthy living? What logic is there in wilfully hurting others while expecting treatment to cure one's own pain or sickness? Does the use of slaughter-house by-products and substances tested on animals really make us beautiful? Why do we speak of needs when what we really mean is wants? The answer to these pressing questions will prove that our actions and thoughts determine our physical and mental state of health; that neither benefit nor joy can come out of harm; that inner beauty is more precious than physical looks; that compassion has many rewards; that out of love and compassion comes spiritual fulfilment; and that discovering our roots is a pre-requisite for distinguishing needs from wants.

Reason, as exemplified by Socrates, was the path to human happiness which led to the birth of Humanism. Despite our common origin and close relationship with non-human animals, who still live largely by their senses, human obsession with and reliance on the exploitation and degradation of others, by all possible means and for all possible reasons, bears witness to a blind consumer ethic which is far removed from our true nature as fruit and plant eaters and holds the greater part of humanity and their taste buds hostage to this bloody inheritance. Whether through religious intransigence or other supremacist views seeking the exultation of some ethnic or species difference above the interests of others, human beings have established a set of artificial

rules to help them shape the world to their own selfish designs, relying on meat as a symbol of supremacy, as well as to exercise their dominion over nature and each other.

Meat eating has also depended on prevailing custom and religious tradition, reinforced by the rationalist, anthropocentric and hierarchical concept of the world promulgated by Western thinkers from Aristotle to Descartes who believed that neither civilisation nor human survival was possible without an unnatural dependence on other creatures for food, clothing, and many other purposes, with the utilitarian goal of making human life longer, safer and more satisfying without regard for the interests of other animals or indeed our own health and well-being.

THE HUMAN-ANIMAL LINK

The struggle between an authoritarian and a libertarian world view is as common today as in China in the sixth century BC when Confucius' utilitarian aim to dominate and regulate nature and society was countered by the Taoist belief that all could live in spontaneous harmony. Like the Buddhists, the Taoists holistic view of the universe offered a path to spiritual enlightenment and a guide to right living. In this, it differed from the hierarchical and authoritarian nature of Confucianism and other less eco-centric cultures and religions which sought to justify and condone the selfish enslavement of animals and nature for their own ends. Attitudes towards animals have been the result of limitations imposed by culture and tradition and the prevailing level of empathy, fantasy and evolution in human societies: for instance, many human cultures find it unthinkable to eat dogs while others will eat anything that swims or crawls.

Animals have filled (as well as defiled) our stomachs, our minds and our imagination, yet their unselfish affection is rewarded with betrayal and rejection. They Inspired Gods and Demons to whom human society appealed for divine intervention. Yet as the embodiment of the Devil they were also the target of religious and public retribution. They have been revered as well as feared. Whether clean or unclean, sacred or common, they have been venerated or hated, worshipped or massacred, idolised or digested.

Thought by St. Thomas Aquinas, the interpreter of medieval Christianity, to be possessed by evil spirits, animals (mainly pigs, who got into trouble easily as free roaming scavengers, but also asses, bulls, cats, cocks, dolphins, goats, horses, sheep, wolves and others) were deemed to have no souls and for twelve centuries they were physically put on trial throughout Europe and the American colonies for grievous so-called crimes.

They suffered public degradation and mutilation; they were burned, buried alive, tortured and strangled, with the blessing of Aquinas's *SummaTheologica*, which proclaimed that animals possessed by the Powers of Hell could legitimately be cursed as the satellites of Satan.

As humanity modified and alienated itself culturally and socially from the natural world, animals played an increasingly ambivalent role in human societies both as totemic symbols and as companions, with few dissenting voices questioning the social and moral implications of the many cruelties inflicted upon them. From the ancient civilisations and empires through to the Christian era, Western culture has not significantly modified its essentially utilitarian view of non-human animals, highlighting both the differences and the similarities between the species as justification for their continued exploitation. But if our bodies were so similar and thus, conceivably, equally able to feel pain, Seventeenth Century Europe needed to place a wedge between man and beast to justify the subservient status of animals as chattels and to feed the growing interest in the new science of physiology.

Rene Descartes' speculative description of animals as mere automatons deprived of souls was a setback for campaigners for civility towards animals. Nevertheless, although this claim is still seized upon by commercial as well as vivisectionist and religious interests to justify the profit motive and the established order, the spirit of humanitarianism never died out thanks to the poets of Nature such as Burns, Blake and Wordsworth, since the influence of their poetry on the collective mind was greater than that of public sermons by priests too preoccupied with human concerns to plead the cause of animals. In Spain, where the clergy have condoned rather than condemned bullfights, priests can actually participate in these bloody spectacles without risk of excommunication.

CRUELTY VERSUS THE PURSUIT OF FREEDOM

Eighteenth Century Europe saw not only the birth of bullfighting as it is known today, but also some of the most appalling cruelty imaginable. Cruelty and mistreatment of animals became so entrenched in folklore and nursery rhymes as well as in daily life, as depicted in 1751 by William Hogarth in his four Stages of Cruelty (detailing the fall of a charity boy from brutality to murder), that even those who might raise their voices against particular instances of cruelty would have been unable to grasp the extent of the harm that they themselves inflicted on animals in other ways - just as today hunting or bullfighting arouse righteous indignation among many people who then see no contradiction between that and other institutionalised forms of animal cruelty.

In the Age of Enlightenment and the early nineteenth century, at the same time as human slavery was being seriously challenged in industrial societies, a parallel was drawn between human and animal slavery which signalled the birth of the animal welfare/ animal rights movement as a direct challenge to Aristotle's well established anthropocentric interpretation of nature in which less rational and less perfect animals and human beings were not entitled to equal consideration by their masters.

Campaigners against slavery and social injustice such as Richard Martin, William Wilberforce and Lord Shaftesbury were also active in the cause of animals. When Henry Bergh, pioneer of America's animal welfare societies, was asked to intercede on behalf of "a little animal" suffering at the hands of a brutal woman, he rose to the challenge and successfully prosecuted the woman for cruelty to an animal. The animal was in fact a human child, and the British RSPCA helped to form the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children in New York. The Humanitarian League, co-founded by Henry Salt in Britain, was also active until 1919. However promising its beginnings, humane reform nevertheless did not represent a serious challenge to a flawed social system built on the backs of those least able to defend themselves: the countless animal species exploited for their flesh, fur or body parts, as well as the many disadvantaged humans, including women and children, who were and still are unable to pursue their own lives without hindrance or threat of violence. Prejudice, ignorance and greed are good allies: with the help of entrepreneurs who advise us what to eat, buy, use, watch, etc. the majority are persuaded to adapt and uphold the established order without question, making it even more difficult to confront any form of institutionalised cruelty like bullfighting, abolished in Spain and the American colonies in 1805 and sanctioned once again by royal decree in democratic Spain in 1992. In other countries where effective animal protection legislation is similarly lacking, a campaign for justice towards animals is still seen as a direct challenge to the establishment.

According to a recent poll, 82% of Spaniards have never attended a bullfight and 87% condemn animal suffering in public spectacles. Yet the complicity of powerful interests, including the Church and other public institutions, through their silence and even open support for bloody spectacles (promoting a strange and sick fascination with rituals of death), has successfully thwarted the adoption of animal welfare laws which could bring the Spanish penal code into line with other members of the European Union in terms of humane legislation.

Bullfighting, like bear-baiting and bull-baiting in Britain (where it was thought that such pursuits prepared men for fighting wars), had a certain underlying practical or political justification in Spain and Latin America since such spectacles were thought to have a stifling effect on political dissent: people who stood by while animals were publicly bled to death could hardly be squeamish about social injustice - something that is just as true today. As befits royalty, King Juan Carlos of Spain, himself a hunter, is also one of the most passionate supporters of bullfighting, a spectacle which benefits from public funds to promote the holding of bullfights in towns and villages which would not otherwise have the means to do so. Another area that deserves serious attention is that of the hundreds of religious fiestas in which animals are chased, tortured and killed in honour of various saints.

To check the ravages of civilisation we need to address humanitarian concerns in a civilised manner and adopt laws and ethical solutions to rectify the wrongs and excesses of a consumer society confronted by social upheaval and ecological catastrophe. We cannot legitimately expect to enjoy rights or social privileges that we consciously deny to other equally deserving individuals less fortunate than ourselves. We need a universal ethic of respect for life and to uphold and extend essential legal rights to all sentient beings, as now enshrined in the German Constitution, to guarantee them a life without fear of persecution, cruelty or abuse.

NVNH This article was a paper presented at the World Vegetarian Congress in Edinburgh in July, 2002.