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77 The Animal Rights Movement as a Moral Crusade

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Although the number of animal rights organizations in the United States is small compared to the membership of other social movements, animal rights activists have enjoyed numerous victories since the 1980s. Why has this small group been so successful? James M. Jasper and Dorothy Nelkin provide some of the answers. They describe the animal rights movement as a "moral crusade" that relies, for example, on sympathetic media coverage, sentimental views about pets, and coalitions with other recent protest movements to achieve their objectives.

On a warm spring day in May, 1980, Henry Spira was on Manhattan's posh Fifth Avenue with a flatbed truck filled with white rabbits. With him were 300 more demonstrators, many of them dressed in bunny suits. On the sidewalk in front of the headquarters of the cosmetics giant Revlon, they were protesting that company's extensive use of white rabbits to test the safety of new products. The demonstrators were angry about procedures in which substances were placed in rabbits' eyes to test if these ingredients caused redness, swelling, or cloudiness. Many demonstrators had been drawn to the protest by full-page advertisements in the *New York Times* and other papers that asked, "How many rabbits does Revlon blind for beauty's sake?"

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After a friend left him a cat in 1973, Spira, a burly man in his early fifties, had become increasingly outraged over humans' treatment of animals, wondering about "the appropriateness of cuddling one animal while sticking a knife and fork into others." He grew more and more critical of such common practices as wearing furs and leather and eating meat. For more than a year he had talked to Revlon officials, hoping to persuade them to contribute several hundred thousand dollars to help develop alternative tests that did not use live animals. When Revlon officials listened politely but then ignored him, he put together a coalition of 400 animal groups, mostly humane societies operating spay clinics and offering cats and dogs for adoption. And he gathered funds for the newspaper ads. He felt public opinion would be on his side: "I think there are very few people on the street who'll say, 'Yeah, go around and blind rabbits to produce another mascara.' "[1]

Following the May rally, public protests continued alongside Spira's private negotiations, and

in December 1980 Revlon capitulated, announcing that it would provide Rockefeller University $750,000 for research on alternative tests. Soon other companies followed Revlon's lead; by 1987 many had ended live animal testing; and the cosmetics industry claimed to have contributed about $5 million to alternatives research.

Four years after the Revlon demonstration, another effort to liberate animals unfolded in the laboratories of the University of Pennsylvania Medical School. On Memorial Day weekend in 1984, five members of the Animal Liberation Front (ALF) surreptitiously entered the deserted research lab of Thomas Gennarelli, who headed a team of researchers studying the effects of severe head injuries. Underway for fourteen years, these experiments currently involved severe shocks and injuries—similar to whiplash in car accidents—to the heads of baboons. The intruders destroyed equipment worth $20,000 and removed sixty hours of videotapes made to document the experiments.

The members of the ALF shared Henry Spira's goal of eliminating any use of animals for human needs, but they felt a stronger sense of urgency that compelled them to break the law. In most of their break-ins—Pennsylvania was one of more than 100 entries—the ALF has liberated animals rather than videotapes. Its members value animal lives so highly that they feel a moral obligation to act to save them, even to damage property in doing so. Violence against property, they claim, is justified to stop violence against living beings (the animals they liberate). As one activist put it, "Property laws are artificial constructs. We feel we answer to a higher law."[2]

Perhaps the most important result of the Memorial Day break-in is what then happened to the videotapes. The ALF, an illegal group designated as a "terrorist" organization by the FBI, passed the tapes to another animal rights group, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA). PETA edited the tapes into a twenty-minute film called *Unnecessary Fuss,* which portrayed bantering among researchers and joking about the injured animals—"mocking them," as animal activists put it. It also appeared that the animals were not fully anesthetized. Scientists were painted as callous, even sadistic, and so brutal that discussion with them about their methods would be useless: Direct action against such research was the only appropriate response. The film proved a powerful instrument for PETA in its efforts to recruit new and committed members to an emerging protest movement.

The Revlon and University of Pennsylvania incidents are just two among thousands of recent animal rights protests, lawsuits, break-ins, and other actions that have targeted scientific laboratories, cosmetic and pharmaceutical firms, slaughterhouses and butchers, fur ranchers and retailers, rodeos and circuses, hunters and trappers, carriage drivers, and even zoos. Since the late 1970s, new animal "rights" organizations have rejuvenated the older and larger animal welfare movement, and together they are reshaping public awareness of animals. As many as 10 to 15 million Americans send money to animal protection groups, which have proliferated: By 1990, there were several thousand animal welfare and several hundred animal rights organizations in the United States. Some focus on particular animals (The Beaver Defenders, Bat Conservation International); others have a religious bent (Life for God's Stray Animals, Jews for Animal Rights); some are organized around tactics (the Animal Legal Defense Fund); others protest particular uses or abuses of animals (Students United Protesting Research Experiments on Sentient Subjects); still others represent links with related causes (Feminists for Animal Rights). The pull of these groups was evident in June 1990, when 30,000 people participated in a march on Washington for animal rights, with slogans such as "Fur Is Dead," "No Tax Dollars for Torture," and "Blinding Bunnies Is Not Beautiful."

Renewed concerns about animals have generated a powerful social movement driven by a simple moral position: Animals are similar enough to humans to deserve serious moral consideration. They are sentient beings entitled to dignified lives, and they should be treated as ends, not as means. Protectors ask how we can love our pets,

yet experiment on identical animals in laboratories; how we can cuddle one animal, yet eat another. They have themselves mostly given up meat, dairy products, and eggs; they refuse to wear leather shoes or belts; they do not patronize the products of certain corporations; and many will not wear wool—let alone fur—garments. While some would allow occasional animal research if subjects are fully sedated and the benefits outweigh the harm, others say this concession violates the inherent right of animals to a full life independent of human goals. Movement leaders often use the morally charged language of good and evil, and their political actions and rhetorical style often display an absolutism that discourages discussion or negotiation with those who disagree.

The new movement has exploded into Americans' awareness. Animal rights has been the cover story of magazines as diverse as *Newsweek, U.S. News and World Report, New York Magazine,* the *Atlantic Monthly,* the *New Republic,* the *Village Voice,* the *Progressive,* and the lawyers' weekly *National Law Journal;* its issues have been featured in network television series like *L.A. Law, MacGyver,* and *Designing Women;* it has been examined in major news programs such as *48 Hours.* Despite a tendency to focus on secretive and sensationalist ALF commandos, most media coverage has been sympathetic to the ideas of the movement. Typically, the activists are portrayed as eccentric, but their positions are treated with respect. Comic strips such as *Doonesbury* and *Bloom County* have favorably portrayed animal activists and their issues. *Saturday Night Live* at least recognized the controversy over fur coats in a skit titled "They're Better Off Dead." Celebrities such as Bob Barker, Doris Day, Casey Kasem, River Phoenix, and several of *The Golden Girls* have given their support to the cause.

Consumer goods have followed suit. One Barbie Doll is an "animal loving" Barbie, marketed as an animal rights volunteer—even as real-life activists attack the mink stole sold by the Spiegel Company for other Barbie Dolls. Vegetarian food is sold for the dogs of those with strict animal rights sensibilities. Public opinion polls show a slippage of support for scientific research using animals, even when it generates information about human health. Activists have delivered a crippling blow to the American fur industry—from which it may never recover. Animal protection is not only one of today's fastest-growing protest movements, it is one of the most effective.

The social roots of this movement lie in the changed relationship between humans and their fellow creatures that resulted from urbanization and industrialization in Western societies, as city dwellers began to encounter animals only as family pets, and less and less as instruments of labor and production. Animals have accompanied men and women throughout their history, some as members of the family to be cherished, others as tools to be used. But in modern times the balance between these attitudes—one sentimental, the other instrumental—has been questioned, as more and more people insist that all animals be treated as though they were partners—"companion animals"—rather than objects.

In the United States, the first societies to prevent cruelty to animals were founded in the 1860s as part of the more general humanitarian impulse of the time. While these societies persisted, further expansion of this animal welfare movement took place in the 1950s, with the founding of such organizations as the Humane Society of the United States. Most of these groups concentrated on problems associated with the growing number of pets: overpopulation and frequent abandonment, the issue of shelters, and the frequency of brutality and cruelty. These humane societies and welfare organizations saw animal cruelty coming from poorly educated or abusive individuals, not from the systematic activities of institutions.

A new ideological agenda for animal protection emerged dramatically in the late 1970s, combining ideas from several sources. It retained the animal welfare tradition's concern for animals as sentient beings that should be protected from unnecessary cruelty. But animal activists added a new language of "rights" as the basis for demanding animal

liberation. In the individualist culture of America, "rights talk" is often the only way to express moral values and demands. Rights—whether of patients, women, fetuses, or animals—are accepted as a moral trump card that cannot be disputed. Justified in terms of tradition, nature, or fundamental moral principles, rights are considered nonnegotiable. Protectors compare animal rights to human rights, and the charge of "speciesism" takes its place alongside racism and sexism. Wildlife traffickers are engaged in a "monkey slave trade," laboratories become "torture chambers," and animal testing is a "holocaust."

The moral vision of animal rightists is partly drawn from other movements, especially feminism and environmentalism. At the core of these ideologies is a critique of "instrumentalism," the confusion of ends and means said to prevail in contemporary society. According to this critique, instrumental attitudes reduce nature and women, as well as other humans—all with inherent value as ends in themselves—to the status of things and tools. At the same time, instrumentalism promotes technologies, markets, and bureaucracies—all intended to be the means for attaining the good life—to the status of ends. Uneasiness with instrumental attitudes is widespread: Many people feel that there is something wrong with basing all decisions on economic values; that science lacks a human face; that consumer society creates artificial needs rather than satisfying real ones; that humans are treated like cogs in a machine.

Recent protest movements—ranging from Christian fundamentalists to radical feminists—insist that policies and decisions be guided by moral values and social needs, not by profits, technological feasibility, or bureaucratic inertia. Just as environmentalists question the exploitation of nature for commercial purposes, so animal rights advocates demand the end of animal exploitation for human gain. Animals, like human beings or nature, should be treated as ends rather than as means. This view grounded the mistreatment of animals in institutions rather than blaming misguided individuals. Rather than searching for individual scientists who inflicted unusual pain on their animal subjects, activists condemned all research using live animals, thereby attacking the heart of biomedical science. Instead of criticizing the occasional circus for its cruelty in training animals, they rejected any use of animals to entertain people as exploitation and humiliation. Here was a new view of the relationship between animals and human institutions, one that often condemned the very essence of those institutions. The appeal of this critique helps explain the transformation of animal protection into a radical animal rights movement.

But a fuller explanation lies in common cultural beliefs and implicit understandings about animals in our society, since the treatment of other species often reflects a culture's moral concerns. Animals were the first subject of painting—on the walls of caves—and the first metaphors in human thought—for example, as symbols of tribes and families. They may have been the first objects to be worshiped, perceived as embodiments of spirits. Animals exhibit enough diversity of behavior and attributes to provide an extensive vocabulary for our own thinking. Throughout recorded history, men and women have found that animals were "good to think with," a rich source of symbols that humans could use to impose order on the world. They are blank slates onto which people have projected their beliefs about the state of nature, about "natural" forms of hierarchy and social organization, about language and rationality, and about moral behavior. Lessons are drawn from the supposed behavior of tortoises and hares, from the social organization of ants and grasshoppers, from the territoriality of lions and wolves.

We also project onto animals the characteristics of humans—sensitivity to pain, emotional bonds such as love and loyalty, the ability to plan and communicate. People have long endowed animals with human characteristics—crafty foxes, greedy pigs, lazy cats. Conversely, they use animals to characterize humans—people chatter like magpies, work like mules, and squirrel things away. We speak of male chauvinist pigs; we complain that Uncle Pete hogs the sports section. We use

expressions like rat's nest, rat race, dirty rat, and smelling a rat. The sloth was even unlucky enough to be named after one of the seven deadly sins. But we can also romanticize animals, projecting onto them traits that make them better than people: a goodness, innocence, and purity rarely found in human company. Animals often come to represent the best in human nature, those qualities we cherish and try to protect.

If animals share so many human characteristics, what are the essential differences? The distinction between humans and other animals is the key issue in the growing number of disputes over animal protection. "A life is a life," whether human or nonhuman, is a common refrain in animal rights rhetoric. Ironically, science itself has helped to blur the boundaries between humans and other animals. Evolutionary biology, after all, is controversial among Christian fundamentalists precisely because it violates the long assumed distinction between man and the animal world. While religious movements like creationists struggle to maintain boundaries, believing Man was created in God's image, animal rightists have taken biologists literally, denying moral distinctions between species as the "effluvium of a discredited metaphysics."[3]

For most people, the boundaries between animals and humans are intuitively clear. A human life is simply worth more than a nonhuman life, and while animals deserve some moral consideration, they are not to be exempt from human use. Such distinctions, however, remain matters of belief, not of evidence; they are affected by cultural preferences, personal values, and moral sentiments—traits not entirely open to rational persuasion. Rhetoric that compares animal suffering with the holocaust, that equates speciesism with racism, has emotive power for those who blur the boundaries between humans and other species. For others, these metaphors appear outlandish, threatening, dangerously defying accepted categories. The conflict between animal advocates and animal users is far more than a matter of contrasting tastes or interests. Opposing world views, concepts of identity, ideas of community, are all at stake. The animal rights controversy is about the treatment of animals, but it is also about our definition of ourselves and of a moral society. For this reason, it cannot be easily resolved.

Animal rights is a moral crusade. Its adherents act upon explicit moral beliefs and values to pursue a social order consistent with their principles. Their fervent moral vision crowds out other concerns. Most moral crusades focus on single issues: Some focus on abortion; others on drunken driving; still others on the evils of pornography. Their members—moral missionaries—often insist they have no broader partisan agenda. They are less interested in material benefits for themselves than in correcting perceived injustices. Animals are a perfect cause for such a crusade; seen as innocent victims whose mistreatment demands immediate redress, they are an appealing lightning rod for moral concerns.

The symbolic importance of animals in this crusade underscores the importance of ideas in inspiring social movements, shaping their tactics, and enhancing or limiting their effects. To organize a crusade, movement leaders appeal to the moral sentiments of like-minded citizens, inciting their anger with emotive rhetoric and strategies ranging from colorful public rallies to clandestine break-ins that free animals from laboratories. The language of moral crusades is sometimes shrill, self-righteous, and uncompromising, for bedrock principles are nonnegotiable. In the strident style of Old Testament prophets, scolding and condemning their society, organizers point to evils that surround them and to catastrophes that will befall society in the absence of reform. Extreme and even illegal strategies and tactics are seen as justified in order to stop widespread immoral practices. Their sense of moral urgency encourages believers to ignore laws and conventional political processes, and they organize themselves into groups structured for quick action, not participatory debate. Proselytizing and interventionist in their style, such crusades frequently appear dangerous to those who do not share their judgmental and uncompromising views.

Yet animal protection groups vary widely in their aims and thus in their shrillness. Contrasting goals, tactics, and philosophical positions bring forth different organizations that form a continuum from reformist to radical. However, they tend to cluster into three kinds of groups that we label welfarist, pragmatist, and fundamentalist. In the humane tradition of the ASPCA, animal *welfarists* accept most current uses of animals, but seek to minimize their suffering and pain. They view animals as distinct from humans, but as objects entitled to compassion. Their reformist position, advocated through public education and lobbying for protective legislation, has long enjoyed wide public support and continues to do so. Welfarist groups like the SPCAs and the Humane Society of the United States existed before the animal rights movement appeared, and remain the largest, most powerful organizations.

In the late 1970s, however, more radical groups formed on the fringes of the animal welfare movement, redefining the issue of animal welfare as one of animal rights. Some of these new advocates organized around the well-articulated and widely disseminated utilitarian perspective of philosopher Peter Singer. Because animals could feel pain and pleasure, Singer argued that they deserved moral consideration, and he demanded drastic reduction in their use. The *pragmatist* groups feel that certain species deserve greater consideration than others, and would allow humans to use animals when the benefits deriving from their use outweigh their suffering. They seek to reduce animal use through legal actions, political protest, and negotiation. Henry Spira is a prominent example of a pragmatist.

Some of these new advocates, however, demanded the immediate abolition of all exploitation of animals, on the grounds that animals have inherent, inviolable rights. These more extreme animal rights *fundamentalists* believe that people should never use animals for their own pleasures or interests, regardless of the benefits. Some see even the ownership of pets as a distortion of the animals' natural lives. Insisting that increased understanding of head injuries does not justify harming baboons, the Animal Liberation Front expresses the fundamentalists' position, as well as their compelling sense of urgency. Although far less numerous than pragmatist or welfarist organizations, these groups set the tone of the new animal rights movement. And they are growing in size and wealth.

These distinctions are not absolute or rigid. Some activists, for example, believe in full animal rights, but pursue their goals with pragmatic strategies. Many shift their language and tactics depending on the issue or political arena. And all are tempted to indulge in fundamentalist rhetoric that simplifies the moral issues and demonizes opponents. But these three labels are useful to highlight important differences and tensions within a movement often described in monolithic terms. For the movement itself is divided over many issues: whether the same attention should be given to helping wild animals and domestic ones, whether insects or reptiles should be championed as fervently as furry mammals, and, especially, whether destructive tactics are acceptable.

Nevertheless, welfarists, pragmatists, and fundamentalists cooperate on specific issues, and their interests as well as rhetoric often merge. Together, they form a remarkably powerful animal protection movement, in which the pragmatists and fundamentalists represent the radical wing—the animal rights crusade. These crusaders would like to challenge Americans to rethink their fundamental beliefs about themselves and their connection to the world around them. They wonder if the boundaries we have drawn between ourselves and other animals are as rigid as we suppose. They would force us to extend the rights we promote for humans to other species. They want nothing short of a moral revolution that would change our food and clothing, our science and health care, our entire relationship to the natural world.

CRITICAL-THINKING QUESTIONS

1. In the previous reading, Jo Freeman maintains that social movements develop when (1) there is

an effective communications network, (2) the communications network is cooptable, (3) a crisis propels like-minded people into action, and (4) people are organized to act. Are these characteristics useful or not in explaining the emergence and success of the animal rights movement?

2. Why do Jasper and Nelkin describe the animal rights movement as a "moral crusade" rather than, for example, a "lunatic fringe" or a terrorist group that vandalizes and destroys scientific research laboratories?

3. Jasper and Nelkin propose a continuum of animal rights organizations that includes welfarists, pragmatists, and fundamentalists. Prepare a short typology of these three groups in terms of their (a) beliefs, (b) major goals, and (c) primary strategies to accomplish their goals. Using your typology, describe what you think are the strengths and weaknesses of each group in developing acceptable public policies that protect animals.

NOTES

1. Quoted in "Animals in Testing. How the CPI Is Handling a Hot Issue," *Chemical Week* 135, 23 (December 5, 1984), 38.

2. Quoted in Richard J. Brenneman, "Animal 'liberator' promises more raids on labs," *Sacramento Bee* (July 2, 1984), B1.

3. James Rachels, *Created from Animals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).