

In Defense of Actual Animals Moving Past the *Welfare-Abolition* Impasse

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When Jenny Brown took the microphone to ask why “humane” meat producers had been invited to promote their products and practices at the 2007 Taking Action for Animals Conference in DC, she was booed by some attendees. In rap sessions at the Animal Rights National Conference in LA that same year, proponents of truly substantial advances for animals, such as the abolition of battery cages, were mocked, mischaracterized, and in some cases reduced to tears by self-identified “abolitionists” who decried them as “welfarists” not dedicated to the liberation of animals. In both cases, experienced activists ended up feeling exhausted and frustrated while newcomers to the movement left their first conference with feelings of confusion and futility.

Let’s face facts: The whirlpool of controversy swirling around the question of whether current efforts to relieve the suffering of existing animals help or hurt the long-term struggle for animal liberation has descended into a death spiral that itself hurts the struggle for animal liberation, demoralizing activists and inhibiting many from taking any action on behalf of animals other than argumentative efforts to promote ethical veganism. Meanwhile, worldwide meat consumption is at an all-time high and rising, vivisectors call on governments to protect them by prosecuting animal liberationists as “terrorists,” and climate change threatens the health and habitats of an ever-increasing number of species.

We can get past this impasse if and only if we are willing to learn to argue constructively, use words carefully, respect tactical biodiversity, and analyze actions strategically within an accurate understanding of psychology, history, and economics. Let’s look at each of those in turn, because the animals need us to be better allies to them and each other.

Creative Conflict Resolution

The point of argument among allies is, or ought to be, the identification of larger and larger areas of common ground by means of careful examination of the sources of disagreement. Consensus, rather than victory for either “side,” is the goal.

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1. pattrice jones is the cofounder of the Eastern Shore Sanctuary and the author of *Aftershock*.
 2. The Eastern Shore Sanctuary and Education Center offers a haven to roosters, hens, and ducks while working toward the liberation of all animals. Working in a locale where multinational poultry production and export corporations exploit people and poison the environment in the course of killing more than a million birds each day, the Eastern Shore Sanctuary & Education Center understands that the abolition of animal agriculture will require a foundational restructuring of global farming and food trade practices as well as fundamental revisions in the ways that people think about themselves in relation to animals. This is one of a series of papers intended to build the capacity of the animal liberation movement to achieve such substantial changes.

To achieve that goal among allies in the cause of animal liberation, we must bring to our discussions the assumption that all of us are acting in good faith, trying as hard as we can to do what's right, and that disagreements among us are due mostly to different ideas that we have about the best way to achieve our shared aim. Those different ideas may be rooted in divergent understandings of relevant facts or in different theories of social change.

It is essential to distinguish between questions of fact and questions of theory, favoring fact over theory and avoiding the use of analogies, which always tend to be interpreted differently by different people and which do not constitute proof in any case. For example, the idea that welfare reforms open the door to the attainment of more substantial legal rights is a *theory* of social change; the idea that such reforms will slow the effort to obtain legal rights also is a *theory* about social change. Neither can be proved to be true or false on the basis of available facts and, thus, moderation rather than dogmatic assertion is mandated when arguing from them. Analogies such as slavery do not aid in clarifying the question.

What are the available facts? What do they collectively suggest? The shared quest to discover this, if done in an open-minded spirit of cooperation, can lead to new and more nuanced theories that can guide future strategies. For example, consideration of the fact of the finite and declining availability of agricultural land suggests not only that fears of increased animal product consumption due to welfare reforms such as abolition of battery cages are unfounded but also that any reforms forcing more space-per-animal are likely to be strategically useful by both significantly raising costs and physically limiting production.

Sometimes, what seem to be deep disagreements turn out to be confusion due to imprecise use of language. Therefore, it is especially important to speak clearly, to listen carefully, and most especially to ask questions in order to ensure that you truly understand what those with whom you seem to disagree are saying. React only to what people actually say, not what you infer they believe or feel, as you may be very much mistaken. Trust that people are telling the truth when they say their beliefs and feelings. Be honest yourself. Begin sentences with "I" rather than "you." Begin discussions by affirming the good faith and shared purpose of all. These and other facets of constructive conflict resolution can turn fractious and frustrating arguments into fertile fields of creative problem-solving.

Clarification of Terms

Much of the current crisis is rooted in imprecise use of words to describe other activists and their tactics. This clarification is offered in hopes that the terms "abolitionist" and "welfarist" will either fall out of use among animal liberationists or begin to be used much more honestly and precisely.

There are organizations and people who believe that animals are rightly considered property but who believe that animals ought to be treated humanely. Those holding that belief are rightly called "welfarist." They are careful to distinguish themselves from those who work for animal rights and, thus, there ought to be no confusion between them and those who seek the ultimate liberation of animals. Unfortunately, such confusion has arisen due to the rhetoric of self-identified "abolitionists" as well as due to the behavior of some organizations that work for both animal rights and animal welfare.

Activists working for legal rights and ultimate liberation of all animals do sometimes advocate for improved welfare for currently existing animals. Some do so as part of a strategy for more substantial change while others do so due to ethical considerations. Some argue from a mixed position including both strategy and ethics. Thus, Ingrid Newkirk of PETA has argued that any recognition of any animal rights by legislators is a step toward the recognition of full rights. Karen Davis of United Poultry Concerns has argued that individual animals ought not be treated as unimportant objects to be sacrificed for the good of the class of animal to which they belong. I have argued that we have an ethical obligation to listen to animals and that we can respond to their clearly expressed wish for immediate relief of suffering in ways that make their continued exploitation unprofitably costly.

It is perhaps not an accident that the three of us are women who have taken actions such as hunt sabotage, vivisection lab infiltration, and open rescue while the most mocking condemnations of welfare reforms have been inspired by the writings of a male scholar who argues from an abstract ethical perspective not rooted in engagement with actual animals. Women tend to work from what feminist scholars have called an “ethics of care” while men are sometimes dismissive of arguments falling outside of abstract systems of rules. Some feminists have identified that preference for abstraction as an element of both speciesism and sexism. Opponents of animal welfare should take care to respect different methods of moral reasoning, being especially careful to not mock women for expressing and acting on their concern for the actual experiences of existing animals.

This is not to say that advocates of animal welfare bear no blame for the dreadful state of the current debate. While most take care not to cross the all-important line between opposing particularly hurtful practices and promoting “humane” animal exploitation, a few high profile slip-ups have given an aura of legitimacy to the mistaken equation between the abolition of specific factory farming practices and the promotion of “happy meat.” The opacity and lack of accountability of the upper echelons of some national organizations have, like the stridency of some “abolitionists,” make productive dialogue difficult.

All sides can help to move the debate past the present impasse by being more careful with language, being especially careful to avoid derogatory uses of the term “welfare” (and derivatives thereof), being especially careful to avoid blurring the line between support for welfare reforms and support for the products thereof, and being more open to engagement with critiques that are respectfully and accurately expressed.

Respect for Tactical Biodiversity

Self-styled “abolitionists” sometimes disdain all tactics other than argumentative promotion of ethical veganism. At the other end of the spectrum, some proponents of welfare reforms have gone out of their way to denigrate those who take direct action on behalf of animals. Neither side in what has become a dangerously demoralizing debate seems to appreciate the fact that significant structural shifts in national or international politics or economics have only ever happened following a period of unrest during which different actors press for the same change from different directions, for different reasons, and by different means. Never in history has a shift as significant as the one we seek been achieved. Surely, it cannot possibly be achieved by *less* comprehensive strategies than those that were needed to win

votes for women or the eight-hour workday in a single country.

In a world where people go to war with one another over what seem (to outsiders) to be relatively minor religious differences, the idea that everyone in the world can be converted to veganism by means of ethical arguments is unrealistic. It is similarly unrealistic to assume that amoral corporate profiteers will change their ways in response to moderate arguments not accompanied by more direct efforts to reduce their profits. Only by recognizing and respecting the importance of tactical diversity can we cooperate with one another in comprehensive strategies might actually achieve what we say we want.

Strategic Analysis in Context

The liberation of animals from all forms of human encroachment and exploitation will require a fundamental restructuring of the world economy as well as revision of all existing systems of government. People who earn their own bread through the exploitation of animals will have to, somehow, find other livelihoods. Local economies rooted in the exploitation of animals or their habitats will have to, somehow, be restructured from the ground up. Powerful corporations that profit from the exploitation of animals will have to, somehow, be forced to give up those ill-gotten gains. The governments that support those corporations will have to, somehow, be convinced to dissolve or reform themselves to serve people, animals, and ecosystems instead. Human attitudes about animals also will need to be reshaped, somehow, despite the fact that all but a few cultures assert human superiority.

How, exactly, will all of that happen? What are the steps by which even a single community might be converted to a cruelty-free economy? By what means might exploitive industries be driven out of business? How might even a single government be restructured to truly represent the animals under its dominion? If animals gained “rights,” how would these be enforced? How, exactly, will the currently quite small and unrepresentative animal liberation movement achieve a worldwide change in human psychology?

In the interim, rather than condemning or supporting “welfare reforms” in the abstract, animal advocates ought to analyze proposed reforms strategically and contextually, holding the interests of actual animals uppermost in mind and remembering that factory farms are for-profit enterprises that go out of business when costs rise too high. Total animal liberation may be a long time coming but factory farms can be driven out of business right now, though a concerted effort to simultaneously reduce demand while raising the costs of production. Welfare reforms can bring real relief of suffering while also raising costs. The abolition of battery cages falls into that category, as this would substantially raise costs while reducing both the number of hens held captive and the extent of their suffering.³

Conclusion

Animals exist and have the right to self-determination. Animals want to be free *and* to be relieved of suffering. Actual animals suffer actual harm when we don't respect their self-determination in this regard. We *can* work toward the ultimate liberation of animals *while also* caring for existing animals, using ethics and strategy rooted in reality rather than theory.

3. Please see our report “Strategic Analysis of Animal Welfare Legislation” for more details.