

One-Track Activism: Animals Pay the Price

By Norm Phelps

A vocal and sometimes intimidating clique is trying to seize control of the animal rights movement. (I realize that to anyone who has not followed this controversy, that may sound over-the-top. I only wish it were, but even a cursory review of their articles and speeches reveals the air of absolute certainty and intolerance of differing views that are usually associated with some forms of religious fundamentalism.) They call themselves “abolitionists” and those who differ with them “welfarists.” While I don’t doubt that many of them are well-intentioned, I think it makes more sense to think of them as “one-track activists” because they insist that there is only one right way to campaign for animal rights, their way, and anyone who pursues other tactics has no legitimate place in the animal rights movement. Specifically, they claim that campaigns for interim bans that reduce suffering—like an end to the use of battery cages and gestation crates—actually harm animals and should be condemned by animal rights advocates. With an unconscious tip of the hat to George Orwell, they literally argue that attempting to improve conditions for animals is something that no animal rights activist can do.

The argument of the one-track activists is twofold: First, they claim that campaigns for reforms that ease the suffering of farmed animals imply that raising and slaughtering animals for human food is acceptable so long as it is done “humanely.” Thus, so this argument runs, the “welfare” message undercuts the “abolition” message and makes it easier for the public to eat animal products with a clear conscience. Their second argument is that campaigning for the reform of the worst abuses of factory farming actually reinforces the legal status of animals as property because it does not challenge that status directly. According to this line of reasoning, since all animal exploitation rests upon the property status of animals, any campaign that does not directly challenge that status is counterproductive.

Although some activists who pursue both abolition and reform accept the “animal welfare” label—claiming that most Americans don’t differentiate between it and other descriptions of animal advocates—I find it offensive. To many animal rights activists, “animal welfare” means the belief that animal imprisonment, enslavement, and slaughter are morally acceptable provided that the animals are spared any suffering that is not essential to the use to which they are being put. And for obvious reasons, “welfarist” is a term of opprobrium in much of the animal rights movement. It was with precisely this in mind that Gary Francione coined the term “new welfarist” in 1996. But to pin the “welfarist” label on activists who believe that “animals are not ours to eat, wear, experiment on, or use in entertainment,” but who also support campaigns to ease the suffering of animals is misleading, divisive, and destructive. It is like calling progressive Democrats “communists” or conservative Republicans “fascists” as a way of excluding them from the political dialogue. And because it divides and weakens the movement that is the only hope animals have, it is the animals themselves who suffer the painful and lethal consequences.

I’m sure that everyone taking part in this discussion can agree that the abolition of all animal exploitation is the only morally acceptable basis for our relationship to nonhuman animals and that abolition is the only legitimate, long-term goal for animal rights advocates. And I think we can also agree that vegan advocacy is the core of a strategy for achieving that goal. Personally, I have been vegan for more than twenty years. In my books I advocate clearly and straightforwardly (“stridently” according to one animal-eating reviewer) for abolition and veganism. And I encourage others to do so, as well. My disagreement is strictly with the claim that campaigns to reduce the suffering of animals are never appropriate, even when used in conjunction with abolitionist and vegan advocacy.

I believe that there are at least five excellent reasons for animal rights advocates to reject the arguments of the one-track activists and simultaneously pursue both abolition and reform—or at the very least, not oppose reformist efforts.

Opening Windows on Torture Chambers

First, campaigns to relieve the worst suffering of animals on factory farms force the public to think of animals as sentient, sensitive beings whose well-being is a matter of serious moral concern. This can only advance, not retard, liberation.

“Out of sight, out of mind,” the saying goes. And reflecting this idea, Sir Paul McCartney has observed that if slaughterhouses had glass walls, everyone would be vegetarian. How many times have we all heard, “I don’t want to hear about that!” And, “Don’t show me those pictures, or I won’t be able to enjoy my dinner!” Campaigns like those against battery cages and gestation crates force people to hear the horror stories and look at the faces of suffering, whether they want to or not. They open windows in the solid walls of slaughterhouses and confinement sheds. They show the public the truth about these death camps, and even though these campaigns may not lead directly to a vegan world, they are slowly but surely changing the way the public thinks about animals and their suffering. And this sea change in public attitude is an important entryway to a vegan society.

The critical point here is that most people are extremely resistant to moral criticism of things that they are personally doing. They simply reject it out of hand and refuse to consider it. They have to be led up to it gradually, one step at a time. Most people come to the animals’ cause by way of something that outrages their conscience *that they are not doing themselves*, like fur, vivisection, or dogfighting, and then as they become more committed, they make the move to vegetarianism and veganism. PETA, for example, receives the most calls regarding: 1) companion animals; 2) circus animals, 3) vivisection, and 4) fur. Similarly, most people oppose the worst abuses of farmed animals (for which, at the beginning, they do not feel personally responsible), and once they are committed to opposing a specific form of cruelty, such as battery cages, the consistency principle can kick in (we all like to see ourselves as consistent; moral inconsistency causes intense psychological distress), making them far more receptive to becoming vegan. The reform campaign throws open the door, so to speak, and once it is open, the need for consistency drives the person to take the next step.

This has been confirmed by the experience of the coalitions that conducted the Florida and Arizona campaigns to ban gestation crates. A good number of animal advocates who weren’t yet vegetarians became active in those campaigns and then stopped eating animals as a result. In fact, I know of at least one animal advocate who now publicly speaks out against so-called “welfare campaigns” even though he became a vegan as a result of getting involved in an anti-gestation crate ballot measure.

In short, two-track activism works by first raising awareness and inspiring people to take an active stand against cruelty, so that they see themselves as people who care about the suffering of animals. This makes them much more receptive to a vegan message. In this way—while it may seem paradoxical to those who are wedded to theoretical consistency—reform campaigns have the practical effect of challenging the concept of animals as mere food-producing commodities and leading people toward a vegan lifestyle.

Driving up the Cost of Doing Business

Another effect of reform campaigns is that they typically drive up the cost of animal products, which the animal agriculture industry sees as a potentially serious threat to its viability. On its anti-animal rights website ActivistCash.Com, for example, the notorious Center for Consumer Freedom, a well-known front for the animal abuse industries, warns that “HSUS spends millions on programs that seek to economically cripple meat and dairy producers.” They are referring primarily to the campaigns to ban battery cages, gestation crates, and veal crates.

The Animal Agriculture Alliance, an industry trade group, makes this dire prediction about the battery cage campaign. “Despite the national average price for “cage-free” eggs jumping 56 cents a dozen in the third quarter of 2007 and now costing 84% more than regular eggs, animal rights groups in California are pushing forward with a ballot initiative to legalize regular production of eggs in California. The Animal Agriculture Alliance believes that the groups pushing this extreme initiative, led by the vegan-driven Humane Society of the United States will endanger animals and *eliminate a cost-effective source of protein for many people.*” (Emphasis added.)

In the October 2007 issue of Egg Industry magazine, Gene Gregory, president of United Egg Producers of Atlanta, expresses the same concern. The article, which includes the banner headline “If All Eggs Were Cage Free, Demand Would Fall,” says that Gregory believes that, “if all egg production were to become cage free egg production, demand for eggs would be reduced because some consumers can’t afford to pay two or three times more for their eggs. ‘People tend to have a reference point for egg prices. If prices get too far out of line, they cut back.’” If the animal abuse industries recognize reform campaigns as a legitimate threat to their profitability, why can some animal activists not see it?

Suffering Matters

Factory farms constitute the most intense cruelty that the human race is capable of. They are, in fact, concentration camps in which sentient, sensitive beings live out their all-too-brief lives deprived of fresh air, sunlight, space in which to move about and stretch their legs or wings, and the ability to live in social communities suited to their natures. Their suffering is so intense and unrelieved from birth to death that insanity is a regular consequence of life in an animal factory. The helpless animals’ minds are simply crushed by pain and deprivation.

The horror of life in a confinement shed or battery cage beggars description. It is literally unspeakable. You and I cannot fathom what it means to spend your entire life unable to move or do anything that would give your life meaning, and *I cannot reconcile myself to the idea that it is acceptable to leave billions of helpless animals in this kind of hell for the sake of a utopia that neither these animals nor their children nor their grandchildren nor their descendents for many generations will live to see.*

Since HSUS launched its battery cage campaign in 2005, not quite three years ago, the percentage of laying hens confined in battery cages has declined from more than 98% to approximately 95%, a significant and measurable decrease in suffering for millions of animals every year. By 2012, veal crates will largely be a thing of the past. (America’s largest veal producer, Strauss Veal, will phase them out by 2010.) And it seems likely that gestation crates will be gone within the next decade. At the beginning of this decade, that kind of progress was inconceivable. Today, thanks to so-called “welfarist” campaigns, it is rapidly becoming a reality. And these changes advance the wellbeing of the animals and bring us closer to a compassionate society in which animals’ basic interests are genuinely respected (obviously, this means that no one is eating, wearing, experimenting on, or otherwise using animals for human ends).

Condemning those who also work to ease suffering in the here and now as if they were the enemy represents the triumph of ideology over compassion and common sense. If we cannot end suffering within the lifetimes of those who suffer, we have a moral obligation to ease it as much as we are able.

A friend of mine who is working on the campaign to place a voter initiative on the California ballot in 2008 to ban veal crates, battery cages, and gestation crates tells me that a small number of California activists are refusing to support the initiative or collect signatures because it is a “welfarist” measure. If millions of animals on California’s factory farms are left to suffer in tiny cages because animal rights activists refuse to help them, that would be a tragedy of mind-boggling proportions.

Suffering matters, and I cannot turn my back on it. I hope you can’t either.

Animals Need All the Help They Can Get

In developing a strategy for the animal rights movement, we have to take into account some very sobering history. As all social justice movements must, veganism began with a small core of dedicated idealists and has been expanding steadily ever since. Serious vegan advocacy in the United States began in 1960 when H. Jay Dinshah founded the American Vegan Society. It received a boost in the 1970s when Rev. Andrew Linzey published *Christianity and the Rights of Animals* and Peter Singer published *Animal Liberation* (which does not develop a strictly vegan argument, but nonetheless had the effect of promoting veganism on a larger scale than had hitherto been seen) and again when the International Vegetarian Union held its biennial convention in Orono, Maine, which galvanized the American vegan/vegetarian movement into an energetic outreach program. In the 1980s, PETA began reaching unprecedented segments of the public with a vegan/vegetarian message, Tom Regan published *The Case for Animal Rights* (which does develop a vegan argument), and Victoria Moran published the groundbreaking and influential *Compassion: The Ultimate Ethic: An Exploration of Veganism*. In the 1990s, PETA’s vegan/vegetarian campaigns expanded exponentially, Alex Hershaft’s FARM began focusing exclusively on vegan/vegetarian campaigns, and Vegan Outreach took, well, vegan outreach, to a new level.

With every year that goes by, vegan/vegetarian advocacy is growing in scope and sophistication, and it is succeeding admirably in the essential work of planting the vegan ideal in the public mind, especially among young people, and demonstrating that a vegan lifestyle is easy, convenient, and does not require personal sacrifice. As I said above, I believe that these efforts are and ought to be the core of the animal rights movement. But we cannot dismiss the fact that forty-seven years after the beginning of the vegan movement and twenty-two years after the birth of the modern animal rights movement, the number of animals slaughtered for food in the United States is continuing to rise.

On October 15, 2007, USA Today reported that a Harris poll put the number of vegetarians at three-percent of the American population. Other polls in recent decades have put it at between two- and four-percent. While it is impossible to get a clear picture—in part because the polling questions are not always consistently worded, and in part because people often describe themselves as “vegetarian” when they eat fish, or when they eat meat “occasionally,”—it seems likely that the number of vegetarians and vegans is increasing slowly, especially among people of college age and younger. This growing awareness among the young is an encouraging development. Vegan advocacy is clearly gaining traction; but just as clearly, it is not going to empty the confinement sheds and shut down the slaughterhouses in the foreseeable future. On the other hand, the campaign to move retailers away from battery eggs—which was inaugurated in 2005—has already improved the lives of millions of laying hens by freeing them from battery cages. These animals will still suffer and be killed, but at least they will be able to walk, spread their wings, and lay their eggs in nests, all important behaviors that are permanently denied to battery hens.

In these circumstances, there is a desperate need to pursue a variety of nonviolent tactics that offer promise of contributing to both the wellbeing and the liberation of animals. By attacking those who want to expand our approaches to animal advocacy as they try to hit upon the combination of tactics that will work best, one-track activists have abandoned reason and wedded themselves to blind faith. Their approach to activism reverses the logical order of things. Instead of saying, “This strategy works; therefore, it is right,” they say “This strategy is ideologically pure; therefore, if we just stick with it, it will have to work eventually.”

In an article posted on Tribe of Heart’s website, James LaVeck and Jenny Stein label activists who favor easing the suffering of farmed animals as “neocarns,” by analogy to the “neocons” who have brought our country and our world to the edge of destruction. Despite this nasty-cutesy wordplay (which imitates Joan Dunayer’s “new speciesists,” which, in turn, imitates Gary Francione’s “new welfarists”), it is one-track activists who most resemble the neo-conservatives in their approach to strategy. The neocons’ insistence that we will win in Iraq if we continue to blindly follow the same failed strategy (“Stay the course.”) parallels the “abolitionists’” insistence that we will create a vegan society in the foreseeable future if we just continue to restrict ourselves to the one-track activism that has thus far failed to reduce the number of animals Americans consume.

Rational advocacy requires that we constantly seek and evaluate feedback on how well our campaigns are working and make frequent mid-course corrections, looking for just the right mix of tactics that will lead to success. We may be ideological about the goal, but we must be pragmatic about the means. Letting our means be determined by ideological preconceptions is a formula for self-righteous failure.

One-Track Activism: It Sounds Better than it is

Mark Twain said that, “Richard Wagner’s music is better than it sounds.” One-track activism sounds better than it is. It sounds simple, straightforward, and theoretically consistent. But history is littered with examples of elegant theories that failed utterly when applied to the real world. Such theories all too easily become an excuse for voicing noble platitudes while evading the difficult, frustrating, messy, nuts and bolts work of transforming our vision into progress for animals.

Consider, for example, Harold Brown, whose presentation at FARM’s AR2007 can be seen on YouTube. In this talk, he promoted one-track activism and declared that “welfarist” campaigns have no place in the animal rights movement, while those opposing, “I don’t have any answers.” And indeed, he didn’t offer a single idea for making concrete progress. The closest he came was to say, “I’m sure we can work out tactics and strategies to deal with the different aspects of animal exploitation.” Devising strategies and tactics that work in the real world is the most challenging part of animal rights advocacy. To brush it aside so cavalierly is a cop out. It must be great fun to be “a big picture kind of guy” (as Brown described himself not once, but twice), criticize people who are working hard in the trenches to alleviate the suffering of animals (“little picture folks,” perhaps, who lack the esthetically magnificent vision of the “big picture” people?) and decline to take responsibility for proposing strategies and tactics. (As Brown cautioned activists, “We have to be careful not to get caught up in the minutiae, in the little things.”) God, as the saying goes, is in the details, in the little things, and a patronizing dismissal of the work that is needed to translate “the big picture” into actual relief for suffering animals, is anything but helpful.

Animals suffering and dying on factory farms need a strategy that will make a real difference in their lives in the shortest time possible. They need a two-pronged approach that combines vegan/abolitionist advocacy with campaigns for reform. One size doesn’t fit all, and it is this combination of tactics that holds the most promise for the most wretched of humanity’s victims, now and for future generations.

Norm Phelps has been an animal rights activist for more than twenty years, working with a number of animal protection organizations. He is the author of The Dominion of Love: Animal Rights According to the Bible, The Great