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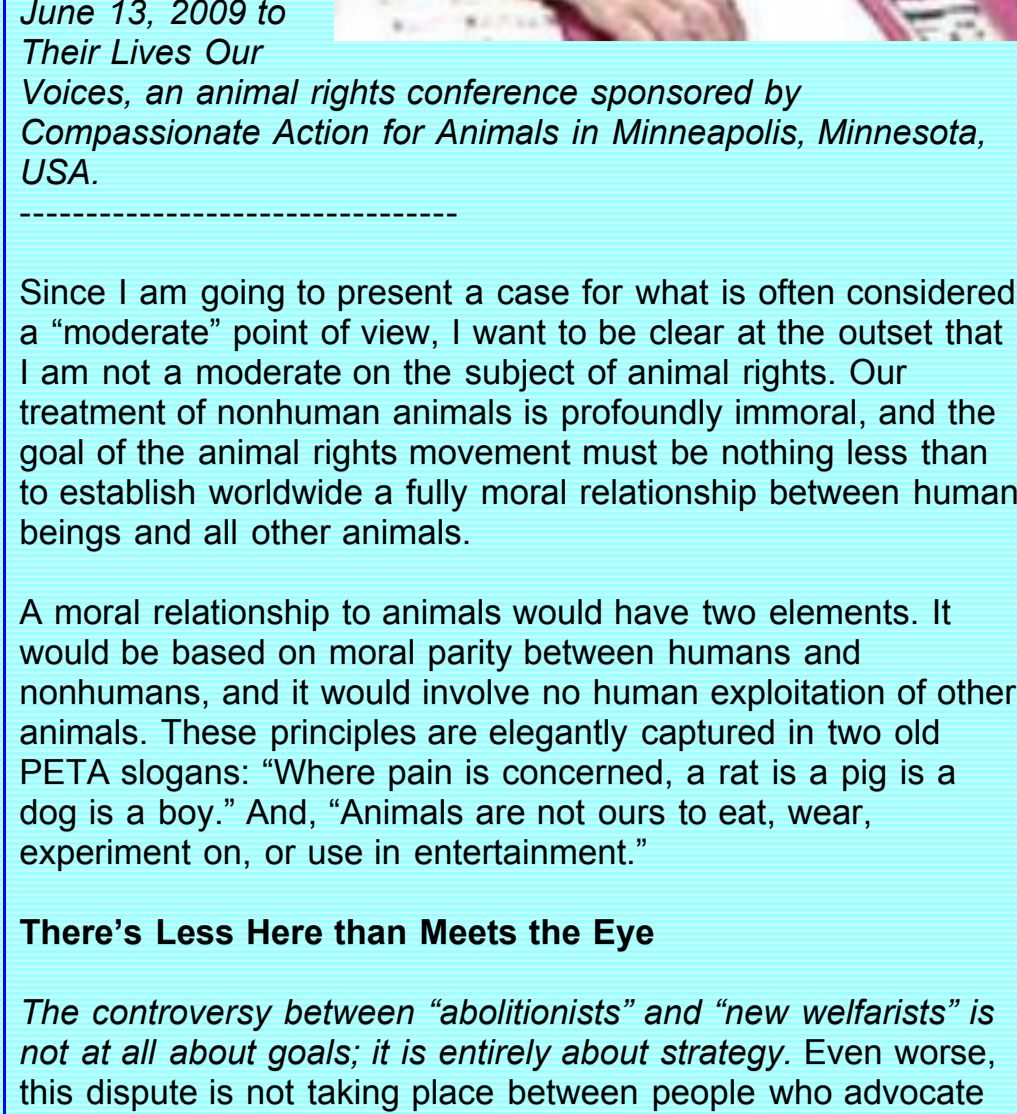
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Norm Phelps: In Praise of 'The New Welfarism'

...the pain generated by the recognition that eating animals produces profound evils intense. Experiencing it, most people go into denial and lash out at the messenger....



Note: The following is the text of a talk delivered on June 13, 2009 to 'The Lives Our Voices, an animal rights conference sponsored by Compassionate Action for Animals in Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA.'

Since I am going to present a case for what is often considered a "moderate" point of view, I want to be clear at the outset that I am not a moderate on the subject of animal rights. Our treatment of nonhuman animals is profoundly immoral, and the goal of the animal rights movement must be nothing less than to establish worldwide a fully moral relationship between human beings and all other animals.

A moral relationship to animals would have two elements. It would be based on mutual parity between humans and nonhumans, and it would involve no human exploitation of other animals. These principles are elegantly captured in two old PETA slogans: "Where pain is concerned, a rat is a pig is a dog is a boy." And, "Animals are not ours to eat, wear, experiment on, or use in entertainment."

There's Less Here than Meets the Eye

The controversy between "abolitionists" and "new welfarists" is not at all about goals; it is entirely about strategy. Even worse, this dispute is not taking place between people who advocate one strategy and people who advocate a different, separate strategy. Both sides support abolitionist advocacy, and both sides agree that abolitionist advocacy, primarily in the form of vegan campaigns, is the heart and soul of the animal rights movement. Further, the dispute is between activists who insist that everyone in the movement pursue abolitionist advocacy exclusively and activists who believe that abolitionist advocacy should be supplemented by reforms that ease the suffering of animals whom we cannot liberate in the foreseeable future, and by outreach to consumers who are not yet willing to make the move to veganism, but might be persuaded to reduce their consumption of animal products.

The emotional power of meat, eggs and dairy is multiplied because it is the material out of which so many of our defining rituals are constructed, from joyous family dinners during holidays to prayer breakfasts and power lunches, all of which are centered on meat (except in those elitist circles where the "health salad" for lunch is de rigueur). For most Americans, baseball games are unimaginable without hot dogs, and what suburban family can go without "cooking out" every once in a summer—going into the backyard and grilling hot dogs, burgers, and steaks. Food is the centerpiece of our dating rituals; only on the radical fringes would "dinner and a movie," not be expected to include meat. It is astounding to think about how many of those occasions that hold our happiest, most cherished memories and our fondest hopes and dreams (for career advancement, for true love) for the home team to win a championship are centered upon food, and how universally that food is meat. Emotionally and culturally—which is to say, both as individuals and as a society—we are more deeply invested in animal slavery and slaughter than we ever were in the oppression of women or people of color.

Second: Animal rights is the only social movement in history whose beneficiaries cannot participate in it and whose participants cannot benefit from it.

History's other social revolutions have typically drawn their momentum from the population that would benefit from success: women in the women's movement, blacks in the American civil rights movement, the colonized peoples in the national liberation movements that followed World War II, gays and lesbians in the gay and lesbian rights movement, and working men and women in the labor movement.

The animal rights movement has no access to the indomitably motivated and endlessly renewable resource that has been available to every other social justice movement—the victims themselves. In fact, its membership is drawn entirely from the ranks of the oppressors. Think of the challenge that the abolition movement would have faced if it had had to depend entirely on reformed slave owners for its activists. That is the challenge facing animal rights.

Third: Most people believe that their health, happiness, and prosperity depend on the abuse and murder of animals. And they will fight to defend these against what they see as dangerous, hostile attacks by radical fanatics.

For people who grew up eating meat, eggs, and dairy, they can be as hard to give up as any other addiction. Although there is no genuine physical benefit to eating animal products as opposed to plants—in fact, animal foods are actually harmful—there is a powerful psychological benefit in not having to deprive yourself of foods that you have learned from childhood to enjoy, to which so many of your happy memories are attached, and which serve as vehicles for your most valuable and pleasurable family, social, and business rituals. For most people, psychological benefit trumps physical benefit every time, which is why so many of us die of lung cancer, emphysema, cardiovascular disease, liver disease, and obesity related illnesses caused by our search for psychological comfort without regard to our physical wellbeing.

Likewise, most people believe that their health and longevity depend on animal research. The benefits of animal research are sometimes real, more often imagined, but the relevant fact here is that the public is convinced that animal research holds the cure for everything from swine flu to AIDS to cancer. Everyone I know outside the animal protection community would be horrified at the idea of ending biomedical research on animals. They are counting on animal research to save them from the consequences of eating animal products.

Fourth: All too many people predicate their self-worth on feeling superior to nonhuman animals. They fight tooth and nail to hang on to this sense of superiority and when it is challenged they feel insulted and devalued and they reject the message out of hand.

The longing to feel superior to someone else is among the deepest, darkest urges of the human spirit—and one of the most difficult to root out. People will frequently endure poverty, suffering, and even face death for no better reason than to feel superior to someone else or some other group.

Ancient Greeks felt superior to "barbarians." Christians and Muslims feel superior to "infidels," including each other. The rich feel superior to the poor; people with old money or old pedigrees feel superior to people with new money or no pedigree. Men feel superior to women. Whites feel superior to everybody. And everybody feels superior to animals. Animals are the inferiors of last resort, because when we acknowledge that their worth is equal to our own, there is no one left for anyone to feel superior to. And while this fact is rarely acknowledged by animal activists, this need to feel superior is one of the most important barriers to public acceptance of animal rights, just as it was one of the most important barriers to rights for women and people of color.

And finally: When you recognize the justice of the animals' cause, you understand for the first time that your life up until now has been based on immoral acts. A moment later, you realize that the same is true of your family and friends, and of nearly all the people whom you and our society respect and honor; their lives, like yours and mine, have been based on evil.

American economist John Kenneth Galbraith is widely quoted as saying that "In the choice between changing one's mind and proving there's no need to do so, most people get busy on the proof." This is nowhere more true than when we are challenged to change our minds about the morality of behavior of which our society approves, which we enjoy, and from which we believe we benefit.

This is because it is urgently important to all of us to think of ourselves as moral people. There are few experiences more painful than acknowledging that our behavior is, in fact, immoral. And so, the pain generated by the recognition that eating animal products is profoundly evil is intense. Experiencing it, most people go into denial and lash out at the messenger. They refuse even to consider the question of animals' rights because of the horror with which they would have to regard their own past life, and the lives of their parents, spouses, teachers, clergy, friends, and co-workers; not to mention their national leaders, their spiritual and philosophical mentors, and the people they admire in business, education, sports and entertainment.

For this reason, abolitionist campaigns alone, unsupported by other strategies, will never reach most members of the public. Most people will reject them because of the intense emotional distress they cause. The public will have to be led gradually, indirectly, one logically inconsistent step at a time to this recognition of the evil that permeates our lives, our families, and our societies, so that it overtakes them before they can throw up their defenses.

This process usually begins by drawing people's attention to some atrocity for which they do not feel personally responsible. "Sure," most people say, "I eat meat and eggs. But I don't put chickens in battery cages or pigs in gestation crates. You can make pork chops and omelets without those things." But once they acknowledge the cruelty of battery cages and gestation crates, it becomes harder to deny the cruelty of slaughterhouses. This first step commits them to feeling moral responsibility for animals, begins the process of breaking down their resistance, and paves the way for the next step.

Most people are not like us. Most people are not activists for any cause, human or animal, and never will be. For most of us in the animal activist community, a switch flipped in our heads one day, and we could never see the world in the same way again. Our lives changed forever. But for most of the public, it does not work that way. They need to be brought along slowly, inch by inch. And the point to which we are able to bring one generation will be the starting point from which the next generation will set out. Until finally, we will have chipped away at speciesism to the point that we will be able to bring down the entire structure of animal slavery and slaughter.

A Foolish Consistency "Abolitionists" have been seduced by a theory. And the theory that possesses them says that the means must always be logically consistent with the goal. This sounds reasonable, but it is simply not true. One-track activists are easing the pain of their own cognitive dissonance by adopting a consistency so rigid that it loses touch with the real world. Abstract theory is always consistent, the real world is messy and logically inconsistent. A logically coherent theory that ignores the illogic of reality is what Ralph Waldo Emerson was referring to when he spoke of "a foolish consistency" "that is the hobgoblin" that is, an obstacle to reaching the real world. One-track activism is the hobgoblin of the animal rights movement.

History is littered with the wreckage of elegant and reasonable-sounding theories that crashed and burned when they collided with reality. One-track activism—the notion that we must all pursue abolitionist advocacy exclusively—is just such a theory.

One-track activism ignores the fact that converting people to animal rights is not primarily a matter of logic. It is primarily about finding our way around the formidable social and psychological barriers that we have erected to defend animal slavery and slaughter. This is why pursuing multiple approaches is essential. We need indirect—logically inconsistent, if you will—tactics to get past the emotional, cultural, familial, and social stone walls that keep people from hearing and acting on the abolitionist message.

It is true that we need philosophers and activists like Gary Francione and Alex Her shaft, founder and president of the Farm Animal Rights Movement (FARM) conducting exclusively abolitionist advocacy. They define the goal and assure that we keep it clearly in view. They make sure that we do not become so wrapped up in our pragmatism that we lose sight of the target. And they reach the people who are open to the vegan message. But we also need groups like PETA, The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) and Farm Sanctuary who are simultaneously reaching out to people who react negatively to pure vegan advocacy. Sadly, those people are the vast majority of the population. But unless we can bring them on board, abolition will never become a reality.

Moving Forward Step by Step by Step

Bismarck was right when he said that politics is the art of the possible. In the real world, as opposed to the ivory tower inhabited by the theorists of one-track activism, you campaign for what it is realistic to think you might be able to get. And when you get it, you use that as a platform to get more. And you keep advancing in that fashion, one step at a time, until you reach your goal. That is how progress takes place.

FARM, which is one of the most active groups in the US opposing animal agriculture, refused to support a California ballot initiative in the 2008 election (1) —known as Proposition 2—to ban battery cages and gestation crates because it was a "low-bar" measure. Despite opposition from FARM, Gary Francione, and other one-track advocacy groups, Proposition 2 passed by a wide margin. Today, FARM is conducting a campaign openly using the victory of Prop 2 as a basis for vegan advocacy. I think that is a good use of Prop 2, and it indicates one of the numerous ways in which campaigns for reform can advance abolition. Reform campaigns do not undermine vegan advocacy; they complement and facilitate it. They create a platform from which the next stages of the campaign for an end to animal slavery and slaughter can be launched.

The Limits of Flexibility

There is, however, one caveat that I want to place on this: we must never claim that eliminating the egregious practices of factory farming will render animal agriculture morally acceptable. I do not approve of programs like the "certified humane" labeling program sponsored by Humane Farm Animal Care and endorsed by a number of other organizations including The Humane Society of the United States. The initiatives they support and the standards they establish reduce the suffering of farmed animals, and in and of themselves, they are a good thing. I would have no trouble supporting them. My problem is with the label. Calling any commercial animal farm "humane" crosses a line. The label endorses the morality of animal agriculture, including animal slaughter; it says that eating this meat or these eggs is OK.

When you say that cage free is "more humane" than battery cages, that is a true statement, and it does not send a wrong message. On the contrary, it encourages people to move in the right direction without implying that this is as far as anyone is going. But to say that cage free is "humane" does send a wrong message, and we should not do it.

Turning our Backs on Suffering

There is a second reason why I am opposed to one-track activism. Suffering matters—it matters a great deal—I think it is ethically grotesque that animal activists, the only voices that animals have to speak in their defense, should try to shame or browbeat other activists into silence in the face of unspeakable animal suffering.

The ultimate crime against animals is their murder, whether that murder is preceded by torture or what Scottish philosopher David Hume called "gentle usage." But this does not mean that torture is of no consequence and should not be opposed on its own merits. When we are powerless to prevent the murder of farmed animals—as we are today and will be for decades to come—to abandon them to torture is a betrayal of the victims whose spokespeople we are supposed to be.

You can't walk a mile in the shoes of a battery chicken, because battery chickens can't walk a foot, much less a mile. But stand for an hour in the cage of a battery chicken. Stand jammed so tightly in a cage with other birds that you cannot turn around or stretch your wings. Stand up to your knees in your own excrement and the excrement of your fellow prisoners while being constantly splattered with the feces and urine of prisoners in cages stacked above you. Breathe air so poisonous with ammonia from the urine that your jailers and torturers have to wear protective masks when they enter the building. Never see sunshine. Never breathe fresh air. If you are injured or fall ill, just suffer; nobody cares; nobody is going to send for a doctor. If you die, so what? It's cheaper that way.

This is the existence of a battery hen from shortly after she is born until the moment she is slaughtered. She never sees sunlight, she never breathes clean air, she never takes dust baths or pecks in the dirt, she never sleeps on a perch or sits on a nest, all activities that are vital to the mental as well as the physical health of chickens. This is her life, joyless, hopeless, saturated with suffering 24 hours a day, 7 days a week for the two years that she is allowed to live, a bleak, abnormal, agonizing existence without friendship, comfort, or consolation. And in the face of this misery, the worst atrocity ever perpetrated by the human race, the "abolitionists" tell us that it is wrong to try to ease the agony of these battery hens. They tell us that it is wrong to campaign to abolish these battery cages. Is it any wonder that sometimes I find myself asking, "Whose side are they on, anyway?"

Put yourself in the place of a battery hen. If your advocates are unable to prevent your murder, which would you rather they do, sit on their hands and refuse to ease your suffering, explaining that they have an elegant theory—supported by no actual evidence—that they think will lead to the abolition of all animal agriculture at some unknown time decades after you are dead? Or would you rather that they campaign to make your suffering, and the suffering of your children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren for generations to come easier until that happy day arrives when as yet your torture? If they can ease your torture now, wouldn't you want them to do that? I know I would. If I were spending my entire life in a battery cage from which I could never be freed, I would be frantic for someone to at least ease my suffering.

In her book "Speciesism," Joan Dunayer uses an example so nazivortification camp. Dunayer tells us, "And someone on the outside asked me 'Do you want me to work for better living conditions, more humane deaths in the gas chambers, or the liberation of all concentration camps?' I'd answer, 'Liberation.' In fact, I'd find the question bizarre and offensive. I'd regard the focus on better living conditions and more-humane deaths as immoral." (62)

The unspoken premise underlying Dunayer's rhetorical question is that a campaign to abolish the camps would have the same likelihood of success as a campaign to ease the inmates' suffering. In that circumstance, of course we should campaign for abolition. But that is not the situation we are facing in regard to factory farming. At this point in the development of the animal rights movement, campaigns to abolish animal agriculture have no chance of success—and will have none for the foreseeable future—while campaigns to ease the suffering of farmed animals are succeeding on a significant scale here and now.

In 1992, Switzerland became the first county in the world to ban battery cages. Since then, several other European nations have followed suit. By 2012, which is rapidly drawing nearer, battery cages will be banned throughout the European Union. These laws have already put an end to the worst suffering of hundreds of millions of birds and will ease the lives of billions more over the coming years. In the United States, where progress lags behind that of the EU, HSUS's cage free egg campaign has in little more than a three-year period taken tens of millions of laying hens out of battery cages. In that circumstance, the only sensible course of action is to reject Joan Dunayer's false dilemma and pursue both courses of action simultaneously; that is to say, campaign for abolition and reform at the same time.

Or, if you feel that you can be more effective campaigning solely for abolition, do so. We all have limited time, energy, and resources, and we have to devote those wherever we feel we can do the most good. But do not try to discourage or shame activists who are campaigning for reform. And when you have an opportunity to do things as simple as signing a petition and voting for a measure that would ease the suffering of animals even a bit, sign the petition and cast your ballot. Do not stand back in self-righteous silence while they suffer in the silence of a despair that they are powerless to break.

Alex Her shaft once said that we mustn't get hung up on "suffering." Dr. Her shaft, like Gary Francione and other one-track activists, believes that focusing on suffering undermines abolition. Alex Her shaft is one of the great pioneers and heroes of this movement. Although we have our differences over strategy, there is no one in the animal rights movement whom I admire more. But that does not change the fact that suffering matters. To those who are enduring it, suffering matters dreadfully. I am hung up on suffering, and I do not apologize for that.

The Measures of Progress

Reform campaigns are succeeding on three fronts. First, they are reducing the suffering of tens of millions of animals right now and are demonstrating the ability to reduce the suffering of billions of animals over the next few years, and that alone makes them worthwhile.

Second, they are driving up the cost of animal agriculture to the point that the industry views them as a financial liability. The journals of the American animal agriculture industry regularly warn against campaigns like those to ban battery cages and gestation crates, and tell their subscribers that organizations like HSUS and Farm Sanctuary are the gravest threat that their industry has ever faced. They generally don't even bother to mention Gary Francione or the "abolitionist" wing of the movement.

Third, reform campaigns are putting animal suffering and death on the public's radar screen in ways that generate much less resistance than the pure vegan message often does; they are causing people to think of animals as morally important. And that is the change that has to occur before the general public will respond to the vegan message. Peter Singer recently gave an interview to New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof (2) in which he said, "There's some growth in numbers of vegetarians, but the bigger thing is a broad acceptance of the idea that animals count." Singer "has it exactly right. The idea that animals count is the essential foundation on which the eventual success of animal rights will be built. And that idea is being spread by reform campaigns. Kristof's column is an illustration of this. It was inspired by California's Proposition 2. Without Prop 2, it would never have been written, and New York Times readers, who tend to be disproportionately drawn from America's opinion leaders, would never have seen a column that was remarkably sympathetic to animal rights.

Our ideology should define our goals. But if we ever want to reach those goals, we must let pragmatism define our strategy. Suffering and dying animals need a strategy that will work in the real world and that will provide them as much relief as possible in the here and now, not one that is ideologically pure and makes its adherents feel good about themselves. And the strategy that offers the most promise on both of these fronts is vegan advocacy supplemented by reform campaigns aimed at producers and reduction campaigns aimed at consumers.

A vegan for twenty-five years, Norm Phelps is an American animal rights activist who lives outside of Washington, D. C. with his wife, Patti Rogers, and their family of rescued cats. He is the author of The Dominion of Love: Animal Rights According to the Bible (Lantern, 2002), The Great Compassion: Buddhism and Animal Rights (Lantern, 2004), and The Longest Struggle: Animal Advocacy from Pythagoras to PETA (Lantern, 2007). He may be reached at n.phelps@nyfactv.net

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