



Animal Rights: The Abolitionist Approach

The Four Problems of Animal Welfare in a Nutshell

Vegans and nonvegans alike often have questions about welfare as an approach and abolition as an approach, how the two differ, and how a welfare approach is inconsistent with the rights/abolitionist position. There are at least four problems with the welfarist approach to animal ethics; this pamphlet provides a brief explanation of each.

First, animal welfare measures provide little, if any, significant protection to animal interests. For example, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) campaigned to get McDonald's and other fast-food chains to adopt Temple Grandin's handling and slaughter methods (1). But a slaughterhouse that follows Grandin's guidelines and one that does not, are both hideous places. It borders on delusion to claim otherwise.

A number of animal groups are campaigning for alternatives to the gestation crate for pigs. But, on closer examination, these measures, which involve costly campaigns, really do not amount to very much in that there are considerable loopholes that allow institutional exploiters to do what they want in any event. I wrote a blog essay, A "Triumph" of Animal Welfare? (2), about the gestation crate campaign in Florida, which illustrates the limits of such reforms. The same may be said of most animal welfare "improvements." They may make us feel better but they do very little for the animals.

Second, animal welfare measures make the public feel better about animal exploitation and this encourages continued animal use. Indeed, it is clear that people who have avoided animal foods because of concerns about animal treatment are returning to eating them after being told by animal welfare organizations that animals are being treated more "humanely." I discuss this issue in my blog essay on "Happy" Meat/Animal Products (3).

Ironically, animal welfare reform may actually increase animal suffering. Assume that we are exploiting 5 animals and imposing 10 units of suffering on each. That's a total of 50 units of suffering. A welfare measure results in a reduction of 1 unit of suffering for each animal, but consumption rises to 6 animals. That's a total of 54 units of suffering—a net increase. There is no question that this phenomenon occurs. For example, in Europe, veal consumption has increased as the result of regulation about the confinement of veal calves (4).

Third, animal welfare does nothing to eradicate the property status of animals. Animal welfare standards are generally linked to what is required to exploit animals in an efficient manner. That is, animal welfare generally protects animal interests only to the extent that it provides economic benefits for humans. This explicitly reinforces the status of nonhumans as commodities, as property (5).

For example, The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) promotes animal welfare reforms based explicitly on the economic benefits that will result from the more efficient use of animals as economic commodities. Take a look at the HSUS report on The Economics of Adopting Alternative Production Systems to Gestation Crates (6), which argues that alternatives to the crate will increase productivity and producer profits, or the HSUS report on The Economics of Adopting Alternative Production Practices to Electrical Stunning Slaughter of Poultry (7), which argues that gassing "results in cost savings and increased revenues by decreasing carcass downgrades, contamination, and refrigeration costs; increasing meat yields, quality, and shelf life; and improving worker conditions."

This approach is not confined to the traditional welfarist groups like HSUS. The new welfarist groups, such as PETA, have also adopted it. In Analysis of Controlled-Atmosphere Killing vs. Electric Immobilization from an Economic Standpoint (8), PETA argues for

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the gassing, or “controlled-atmosphere killing (CAK)” of poultry, claiming that the electric stunning method of slaughter “lowers product quality and yield” because birds suffer broken bones and the process results in contamination dangerous to human health. The electric stunning method also “increases labor costs” in various ways.

PETA argues that “CAK increases product quality and yield” because broken bones, bruising, and hemorrhaging are supposedly eliminated, contamination is reduced, “shelf-life of meat” is increased, and “more tender breast meat” is produced. PETA also claims that “CAK lowers labor costs” by reducing the need for certain inspections, reducing accidents, and lowering employee turnover. CAK provides “other economic benefits” to the poultry industry by allowing producers to save money on energy costs, and by reducing by-product waste and the need to use water.

In other words, HSUS, PETA, and others have, in effect, become advisers to assist the meat industry in identifying ways to increase the profits from animal exploitation. Even if this results in minor improvements for animal welfare, it does absolutely nothing to challenge the property paradigm. Indeed, it reinforces the status of animals as nothing more than economic commodities. And it makes people feel better about animal exploitation.

Fourth, it is a zero-sum game. Every second of time and every cent of money spent on making exploitation more “humane” is less money and time spent on vegan/abolition education. Think about it this way: Assume that you have two hours tomorrow to spend on animal matters. You have a choice. You can distribute literature urging people to eat “cage-free” eggs, or you can distribute literature urging people not to eat eggs at all because “cage-free” eggs still involve excruciating suffering and eventual death. You cannot do both, and even if you could, your messages would contradict each other and be hopelessly confusing.

Educating people about veganism is a much more effective way to reduce suffering in the short term and to build an abolitionist movement that can advocate for and support significant change in the future. Animal welfare continues to treat animals as commodities. And welfare reform does not provide significant protection for animal interests, makes the public feel better about exploitation, may actually increase net suffering, and diverts resources from vegan/abolitionist education.

The sooner people see that the new welfarist groups have nothing to do with an abolitionist perspective, the better off we will be. New welfarists have become partners with the institutional exploiters to sell animal products. It is nothing short of obscene that the new welfarists are developing labels (9), such as the Certified Humane Raised and Handled label (10), the Freedom Food label (11), and the Animal Compassionate label (12), to help the institutional exploiters to market animal corpses and products. These efforts have nothing to do with the animal rights or abolitionist approach. Indeed, this is exactly what the abolitionist movement opposes.

Yes, it’s “better” in one sense not to torture someone that you murder. But that does not make torture-free murder “compassionate.” It’s “better” not to beat someone who you rape. But that does not make rape without beating “humane.” The animal welfare movement supports the notion that more “humane” exploitation is morally acceptable exploitation. That is not the abolitionist approach.

Animal rights groups should never be in the business of helping industry to formulate standards for exploitation. Animal rights groups should be clear in opposing all exploitation and in promoting a single, clear message: that we cannot morally justify animal use. Period.

Animal rights groups should be focused on one goal: decreasing demand. They should never be promoting “compassionate” consumption, which only perpetuates demand and makes people feel better about eating animal products.

Notes

1. <http://www.abolitionistapproach.com/media/links/p31/temple-grandins.pdf>
2. <http://www.abolitionistapproach.com/?p=6>
3. <http://www.abolitionistapproach.com/?p=16>
4. <http://www.abolitionistapproach.com/?p=25>
5. <http://www.abolitionistapproach.com/books/animals-property-and-the-law/>
6. <http://www.abolitionistapproach.com/media/links/p31/hsus-report-systems.pdf>
7. <http://www.abolitionistapproach.com/media/links/p31/hsus-report-practices.pdf>
8. <http://www.abolitionistapproach.com/media/links/p31/analysis-of.pdf>
9. <http://www.abolitionistapproach.com/?p=24>
10. <http://www.certifiedhumane.com/>
11. <http://www.abolitionistapproach.com/media/links/p31/freedom-food.pdf>
12. <http://www.abolitionistapproach.com/media/links/p31/animal-compassionate.pdf>

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