

THE ANIMAL RIGHTS MOVEMENT AND THE FATE OF MODERN MAN

Interview given by Evris Tsakirides to Athanasios Papatzimas (July 2008)

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1. Can you describe briefly the parameters of the animal rights movement?

The animal rights movement is concerned with different problems having to do with the exploitation of animals by humans for whatever reason, by whatever method, and under whatever conditions. Perhaps the most basic principle of the movement is that even though animals do not have the same intellectual abilities as do humans, they are, in spite of that, capable of suffering. However, since animals cannot protest through language the tyranny imposed upon them so often by humans, protest and actual help for the victims must originate from certain humans who make up the movement. These people belong to different races, nationalities, classes, and religions: often they are at the same time interested in *other* social and economic problems. They believe, as do many, that it is not right to impose upon another some evil which you would not want others to impose upon you. They extend, however, the meaning of *another*, striving to cover not only the members of our own species, but also all sentient beings. Kicking a rock is a different act from kicking an animal or a baby since both the animal and the baby are sentient beings. Perhaps someone will say that an animal which is dangerous to a person is *also* a sentient being. Certainly, but in that instance the animal activist will attempt to find a way of keeping the dangerous animal *at a distance*, rather than killing it, and if it is absolutely necessary to kill it, certainly he will not wish to torture it.

Within this general framework can be found many types of animal activists. Not all activists have pets, nor are they all vegetarians. Some are trying to put an end to circuses making use of wild animals; others wish to free the “dancing bears” from their gypsies; others work to abolish or to improve zoos; still others aim at putting an end to pet overpopulation. Some work on many different problems at the same time, others concern themselves only with one specific subject. Even so, we can discern two poles within the movement: At one end they say, “Let’s continue to exploit animals for human purposes, but let’s do this under better conditions for the animals.” At the other, “Let’s stop *all* exploitation of animals for our human purposes.” Thus, between these two poles we will meet a variety of ideas, activities, groups, and individuals who make up the animal rights movement.

2. What is your personal relationship and contact with animals?

From an ethical point of view, I believe that one action is more correct than another if it brings more pleasure and less pain to *all* sentient beings which are affected by its being carried out. At one time I wanted leather boots which gave me more esthetic pleasure than those made from synthetic materials. However, when I thought about the animal which, against its will, was butchered to create the boots, I decided that my esthetic pleasure in the boots was completely insignificant in relation to the torment of the animal

which was butchered and skinned. This does not mean that I absolutely adore animals. When Hitler was in power, those who considered it disgusting to buy objects made from the skin of Jews did not for that reason absolutely adore the Jews. They were merely decent human beings. You will tell me that I cannot equate animals with Jews or, generally, with humans—of course, but here we are not speaking about intellectual capabilities, we are speaking about butchering by violence, and on that point I do not see any difference between humans and animals. Sometimes you hear that animals were created *for* human beings. The truth is that animals would live perfectly well without human exploitation. The fact that we have the *ability* to put them in cages and to use them for our own reasons (while they do not have the ability to do the same to us) does not mean that we have the *right* to do so. We could, of course, invent gods who give us such rights so that we might sleep with an easy conscience. A certain philosopher has said that humans are called “rational” because they have a remarkable ability to rationalize.

At this point I must add that my relationship with animals was not always so friendly. Twenty-five years ago I was indifferent to their problems, even though I had the rudimentary Greek kindness to feed the cats which circled my table at a restaurant. Later, in America, under the positive influence of my roommate, I decided to adopt some pets whose previous owners, for various personal reasons, had abandoned them on the streets of our neighborhood. We spayed and neutered them, naturally, and from that time we kept them. Living with these animals and seeing their preference for caresses and games and their aversion to any type of pain, I began to ponder about the food animals that appeared, cooked, on my plate. One day, upon seeing a documentary about factory farming, I instantly became a vegetarian for ethical reasons. However much I liked meat, however much I had become addicted to it, I could no longer endure the barbarity which was necessary for the preparation of my meal. At the same time, I had heard about the many famous people among my fellow humans, from Plutarch and Buddha to Leonardo da Vinci, Gandhi, and Einstein, who had become vegetarians. Further, I knew that my health would be in no danger since three-fourths of the population of India had already lived as vegetarians for many centuries. In the end what I discovered was that my health improved with a vegetarian diet: my typical three yearly colds became one or none at all! I also read that it is possible to avoid heart attacks, high blood pressure, high levels of cholesterol, and different types of cancer with this diet. And there was something else I learned: that vegetarianism helps the environment. Many times, for the sake of our steaks, we destroy the tropical rain forest; we turn it into pasture to be grazed by the cow which we plan to eat later. We have produced so many food animals which, when they break wind, destroy the atmosphere of the planet with the methane which they generate. We consume much more energy (electricity for the maintenance of factory farms, gasoline for the transport of animals and meat) and we pollute the environment a great deal more when we prepare a meal containing meat than when we prepare a vegetarian meal. The feces and urine of factory farmed animals drain into our rivers and slowly filter into the underground reserves of water. At the same time these animals, in order to grow and become fat before they are driven to slaughter, must drink vast quantities of water, while on the other hand, ecologists are sounding the alarm about the future problems of humanity itself from lack of water! Finally, these animals must eat vast

quantities of nutrients from plants. If we weren't raising the animals to eat, the plant foods which the farmed animals now eat (corn, soya, etc.), could feed the millions of hungry men, women, and children of the world. It has been calculated that when one carnivore becomes a vegetarian, *sixteen* hungry people of the third world can escape death by starvation and live naturally, eating those same plant foods which otherwise would be eaten by farmed animals. The fact that fair distribution of such nutritional assistance plays a role when the food arrives in a third-world country does not disprove the original calculation. It bothers me when I see that in order for a person of the first world to eat meat, a person of the third world must die. So, for ethical considerations with regard to both animals *and* humans, for the protection of the environment, and for the protection of my own health, twelve years ago I became a vegetarian and stopped buying leather goods.

My journey has influenced my work in the area of education, as well. Although I never tell my students what they should believe and what they should do, I tell them what I myself believe and what I do. I answer the questions of all who ask about the topic and direct them to the Internet (for example, to animalsagenda.org and to peta.org), and as for the rest, I allow my actions and behavior to do the teaching. Lately, I have been translating into Greek the classic book of the movement, *Animal Liberation*, written by Dr. Peter Singer, professor of bioethics at Princeton University.

3. What is the difference between domestic and non-domestic (wild) animals?

Domestic dogs and cats were at one time wild animals, but through the centuries humans tamed them and kept them for protection from snakes, mice, etc., and today it is very difficult for them to survive on their own in the concrete jungle of our cities, especially when restaurants don't put their tables outdoors or when the trashcans are tightly sealed. In Greece, there are those who feed homeless dogs or cats, and they do well, but few understand that the problem of overpopulation of domestic pets is precisely the *reason* for the abandonment, the strangling, and the poisoning of cats and dogs which happen to be unwanted, and that the most ethical solution is neutering and spaying.

As for wild animals, they certainly do not belong in the living room of an eccentric millionaire, nor on the wall of an amateur hunter, nor in a cage at the zoo (supposedly for educational reasons); nor is it ethical to chain them up and beat them so that they will learn various tricks for the circus, nor should we trap them and kill them with electroshock to the rectum in order to wear their impressive furs at our New Year's Eve parties.

4. Do animals have a soul?

The word soul does not mean the same thing in Homer as it does in Hinduism or Christianity. Often this poor, tormented word is used in order to give greater worth to humans as opposed to the "lower" biological species. In reality, humans can do very

remarkable things, but let's not kid ourselves: *Man* is the animal which at this moment is methodically destroying the planet. So perhaps in posing this question concerning a soul, are we searching to prove that we are completely justified when we do not open up our ethical horizons in order to embrace more sentient beings, in which case consequently, we are also not obligated to change our present behavior toward all these creatures?

5. What is the historical relationship between humans and animals?

It is, almost exclusively, a history of slavery, exploitation, and anthropocentrism.

6. What was the relationship of the American Indians with animals?

The Indians of the past lived under very different circumstances from contemporary Indians or generally contemporary man. Then there did not exist supermarkets with a variety of choices, nor did people know that one can live comfortably without eating animals. It is well known that certain races offered a prayer and asked for pardon from the animals which they killed in the hunt. But we are speaking here about hunting to survive, not about hunting as a hobby, nor about industrialized factory farming (which entails cruel limits upon an animal's movements for long periods of time and the terrible numbers of animals which are slaughtered every day— millions of times more animals are slaughtered now in comparison with those killed during the historical period of hunting for survival). Some of our contemporaries like to refer to traditional Indian hunters because they consider them closer to the "natural man" or, better, because they are trying to find historical justification for their contemporary behavior.

7. What specifically does the present situation offer us?

In the present situation there does not exist that certain sensitivity which we see in the prayers of the Indians or the ancient Greek need to justify our actions by *sacrificing* the animal (upon the order of Zeus, supposedly) before we put it in our oven. Today there is merely the package at the supermarket and the oven. It would probably be impossible for us to slaughter the animal which is inside the package. We wouldn't be able to endure its squeals or bellowing as it tried to escape from our knife. When, however, we see it in the package with its tasteful label, while listening to the soft music wafting from the supermarket's speakers, it is easy to forget the barbarity and the torment. This distance which we have from the pain which we impose on others in order to satisfy particular habits is, of course, not limited to our relationship with animals. However, sometimes when we oppress people, they can sue us. Animals, naturally, cannot, and herein lies a serious ethical dilemma: Knowing that someone is *not* able to take us to court, will we, I wonder, behave well toward him or will we exploit his weakness, interested only in our own personal satisfaction? Also, as I said earlier, today's exploitation of animals is destroying the environment, while at the same time it is worsening the problem of world hunger which is being aggravated day by day by growing human overpopulation. In order to forestall the likely diseases of those animals which live in the narrow confines of

“factories”, they are daily fed antibiotics which make their way into our meatballs and, according to many scientific observers, weaken our own immune system. Perhaps for these very reasons there has been some sudden interest in these matters, because we the victimizers are running the risk of being snuffed out along with our victims.

8. The humanism of the New Age, in placing Man (with a capital M) on a pedestal, has in the end made a target of him. Is, perhaps, the same thing happening with the animal rights movement as well?

The animal rights movement does not place animals on a pedestal. It is simply demanding that animals have the right not to suffer the exploitation and barbarity which humans shouldn't suffer either. Every sentient creature has the right to expect that we will not exploit it, that we will not treat it in a barbaric manner, that we will not torture it. That is all. Animals do not need *all* human rights, just as men do not need the right to an abortion! What I have said above hints also that our medical research ought to at last leave research animals at peace and occupy its time with more modern and more scientifically reliable methods (clinical studies, computer models, in vitro research, etc.) in its attempt to cure human beings (who are *not* mice as are so very many of the research animals). Without being either a doctor or a medical researcher I know that today thousands of doctors and medical researchers are opposed to the use of animals in medical research the goal of which is the healing of human beings and that *they are opposed on scientific, not ethical, grounds*. It is worthwhile investigating the topic on pcrm.org on the Internet.

9. Why is a movement necessary? What is the historical meaning of the different movements?

We say that a movement is an attempt to extend rights to an oppressed group which previously did not possess those rights. The animal rights movement is different from others in that animals cannot organize demonstrations and pay for lawyers, and for that reason, our movement is based on the altruism of *people* who are animal activists and who have nothing material to gain from this struggle. There are those who insist that animal activists ought to be struggling against human oppression and not against the oppression of animals. However, a social revolutionary, in my opinion, could very well be a vegetarian and stop buying certain products which necessitate the ill-treatment of animals, while continuing to be a social revolutionary! Usually, those who say something of this sort offer no help either to oppressed humans or to oppressed animals. The animal rights movement consists of thousands of groups, large and small, who deal with local, national, and international problems. It is far more decentralized than the usual political movements.

10. Years ago the Greek Orthodox Church had dedicated one day (a holiday) devoted to domestic animals during which a general group blessing was celebrated. Finally, they abolished this holiday with the thought that it can strengthen the anti-human tendencies

of isolation and depersonalization of the inhabitants of the contemporary (inhuman) megalopolis. What is your opinion of this?

It appears that these clergymen have not read recent studies from British, Canadian, and American universities which agree on the following conclusion: that the students who are interested in the problems of animals, are interested in other social problems as well. In fact, even further, that they are *far more interested* than those who are indifferent to the problems of animals.

Also, let's not forget that our pets accept us as we are: tired, ugly, poor, or dirty. Their unconditional acceptance sometimes inspires us to search for such relationships with our friends. Looked at in this light, our relationship with our pets can lead us to a genuine religious experience!

Finally, it is well known to anyone who has a pet that the animal offers us an excellent way to meet our neighbors. Someone takes his dog for a walk and engages in a friendly conversation with someone he doesn't know. What does it matter that the dog is the justification for that conversation? Under other circumstances these two people wouldn't communicate at all if they happened to pass one another on the street.