

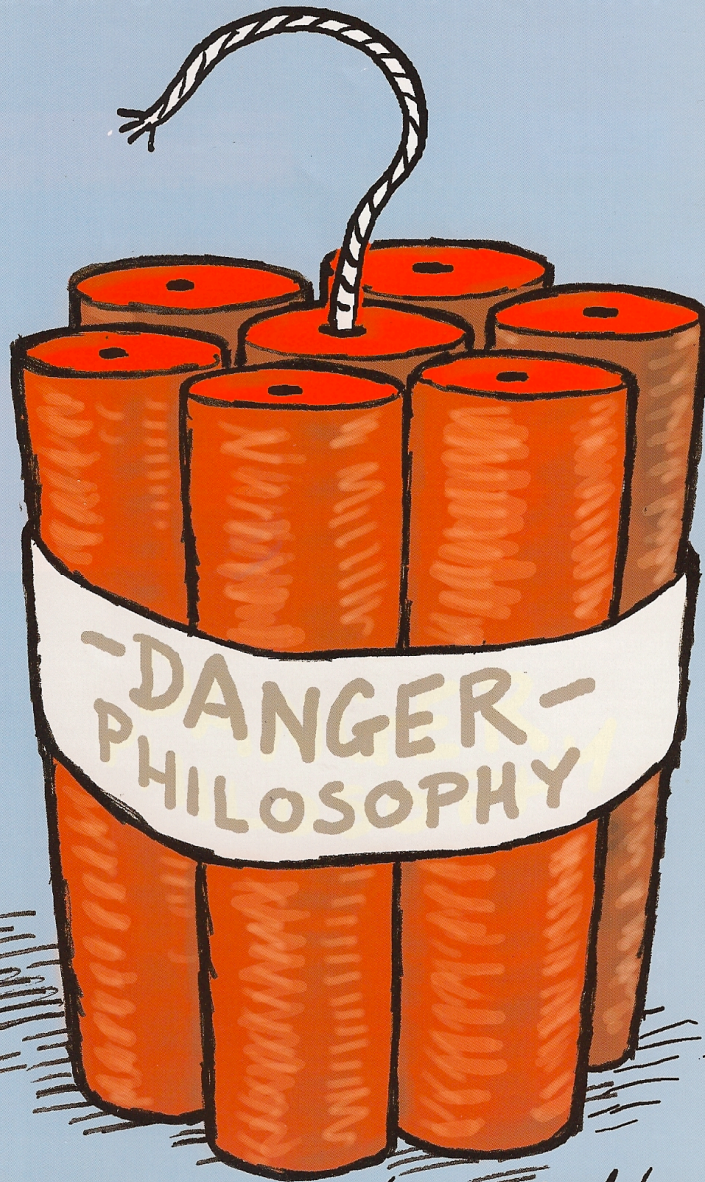
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Philosophy Now

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Explosive Issues



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on Science



Shock the Monkey

Confessions of a Rational Animal Liberationist by **Jeremy Yunt**.

I went with some friends recently to hear a local band I've been meaning to catch ever since I moved to Santa Barbara, California more than three years ago; they call themselves 'Animal Liberation Orchestra'. Aside from being keenly interested in their name, I'd heard they were great players – and, indeed, they are.

My friends and I sat talking on the outside patio of the club for the first few songs, and being that I was a long-time vegetarian at an Animal Liberation Orchestra show, it seemed natural that one of my non-vegetarian friends would broach the topic of the nonhuman animals' fate in our modern, technological world. Not one to proselytize unsolicited for a cause of mine, I was glad for the invitation to discuss an issue close to my heart, particularly with this thoughtful and intelligent friend.

Considering his intelligence, it came as no small surprise when he asserted the first objection to what he saw as the essence of animal liberation: If all animals were liberated, we could expect nothing short of complete mayhem on our city streets. I had to laugh a little to myself at his utter sincerity. You see, for him 'animal liberation' evoked images of a fenceless society where every being had geographic *carte blanche*. A noble pre-agrarian image, I must admit. Radical? Yes. Tenable? Clearly not; not to him, and certainly not to this rational animal liberationist. The blood-curdling image of vehicular carnage littering our streets is enough to make anyone, pro or con, oppose *this* vision of animal liberation.

Admittedly, there are probably as many definitions of animal liberation as there are people claiming to subscribe to it, but there seems to me one common element that any animal liberationist should agree upon: As animals ourselves, any form of 'liberation' should include both an enhancement in the quality of nonhuman animal lives, and a deepening of our own uniquely human ethical lives. In this sense, animal liberation is an idea based on reciprocity: Our efforts to benefit the lives of nonhuman animals are both a cause and consequence of a deepened relationship to life itself.

In the moments I spent talking with my friend at the concert I gained valuable insight into how one particularly thoughtful person viewed animal liberation. How someone less enlightened might view it seemed too frightening to contemplate – yet I couldn't help myself. All I needed was to consider my own evolution toward vegetarianism. I remembered back to my high school days as a fast-food junkie, mindlessly feeding myself and never stopping to question what was going into my body or how I was affecting my own health, let alone the lives of other living beings. I thought of the cows and chickens I watched my grandfather kill, and how they morphed strangely into little white packages lining the shelves of the extra-large upright freezer in our laundry room. It's the fact of how little I

knew *then* that leaves me in a state of humility about the subject *now*. I call the following insights 'confessions' because animal liberation is a personal issue to me; talking and thinking of animals and their suffering at our (my) hands – aside from evoking feelings of sorrow for the animals – often has a cathartic effect for me. Looking back on the first 18 years of my life and how I contributed to animal suffering in so many (mostly unseen) ways, it's not difficult to understand this.

Animal Liberation: Animal Anarchy?

The easiest way I found to relate the rationale behind animal liberation to my initially skeptical friend was to set a comparison between nonhuman animals and small infants; we don't let infants wander the streets unattended, and neither should we let animals. Simply put, animal liberation does not translate into animal anarchy because it is based on the conviction that life – all life – deserves safeguarding from harm.

Likening infants to nonhuman animals rests on the fact that neither can discern what is truly in their interest and safety, especially in our fast-paced, technologically-structured living environments. This lack of ability does not mean we treat infants as mindless things without their own needs and intentions demanding of our recognition and respect. On the contrary, because of their vulnerability we safeguard them from harm so they have the opportunity to develop their needs and interests in the future. We bestow on them a profound respect because their life is inviolable and unique. We sense an unconditional moral obligation to infants regardless of their undeveloped intellectual capabilities or their inability to express themselves to us through language. Sadly, the respect we accord to human infants is seldom extended beyond our own species, regardless of the many ethical parallels between human infants and nonhuman animals.

The Alien Connection

However strange it may sound, though animal liberation is most fundamentally about diminishing the physical constraints and suffering we inflict on nonhuman animals, the need for considering it really arises from the ideological constraints we put on ourselves. I've always believed that humans have far more imaginative resources than we put to use, and in relation to animal liberation this conviction is of crucial importance. To illustrate what I mean, engage your imaginations with me for a moment. Consider an imaginative potential that has grasped the collective consciousness of humanity for a long, long time – namely, the possible existence of sentient beings from other planets in the galaxy.

Imagine that in the year 2010 our government breaks the news that an alien species has been found immigrating to Earth.

Imagine further that this particular nonhuman species is aggressive, technologically advanced and unable to communicate with us. Lacking the means to defend ourselves effectively *and* the ability to object to their violent behavior through language, we would quite soon become their domesticated ‘animals’ to use and abuse at their whim.

In addition to completely altering the Earth’s ecology, this situation would drastically subvert our current understanding of an ethical hierarchy, with humans reigning from the top of the ethical ladder. Unable to express ourselves to these aggressive beings, we would, nonetheless, clearly sense that our rights were being violated. This would stem from our possession of a certain level of ethical intelligence (in addition to our abilities of forming a complex language and possessing abstract thought) which allows us to question situations and decide if they seem ‘fair’ or not. However, regardless of our clear differences from other animals, in the face of my alien-invasion scenario it is pretty clear that *something more* than human intelligence is at work in the creation of ethical demands. For, in spite of our intelligence, sense of ethics, and ability to make complex tools from the stuff of nature, we would still be defenseless against the superior power of these beings and their selfish desires.

Because this is an entirely imaginary scenario, someone could certainly object that the chance of alien beings coming to Earth is next to none. However true such an objection may turn out to be, it misses the point that it is not the factual possibility of an invasion happening that is of ethical importance here – regardless of the scientific interest such an event may entail. Rather, it is the changed vision of reality with which we are confronted when contemplating this scenario.

In the realm of ethics, imagination plays a primary role; it is only when we imagine relationships in the world (ecological, personal, social, economic, political, religious) as existing differently that they garner the necessary force to become a new reality. For example, overt racism against blacks did not diminish in this country because one day those in power decided that African Americans were of equal intelligence and moral worth; it happened because a large enough group –

including those of other races – sensed on a deep level that people were suffering physically and morally, and they stood up against these felt injustices.

Racism, Sexism, Speciesism

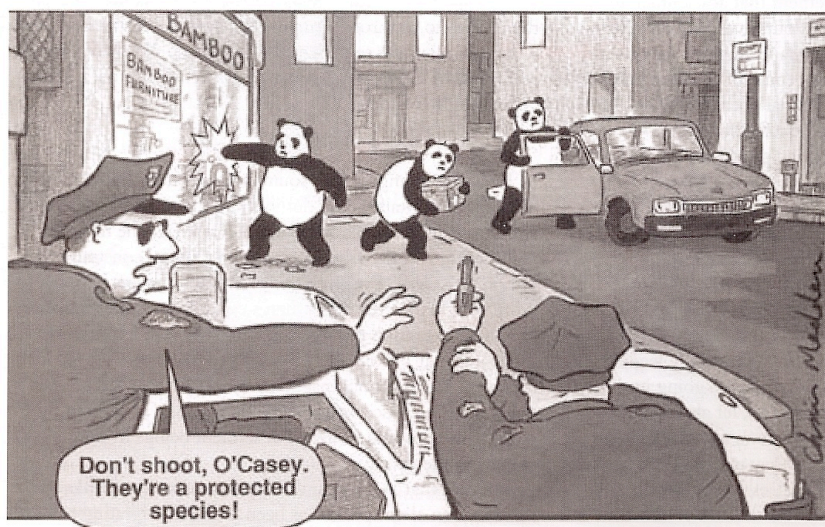
For many years people brandished the epithet ‘nigger lover’ to demoralize and dismiss those whites empathetic to the black struggle for equality and civil rights. Today, the term ‘animal lover’ is used in a similar way to discredit objections to animal cruelty. Some supporters of the status quo are using the term in an attempt to make objections to animal cruelty seem like a sentimental, overly-emotional response to what many people clearly see and feel as an injustice. In Issue 39 of *Philosophy Now*, Joel Marks did a wonderful job of exposing this as the ‘feeling fallacy.’ In the case of animals, however, negative epithets have proven a far more effective method of oppression, for the less a being is able to speak up for its rights, the slower such rights are in coming.

The fact is, most humans are *speciesists*. Accordingly, most people assume that the rules of ethical reasoning – such as consistency – stop applying as soon as we begin discussing species other than *Homo sapiens*. The most blatant proof of this is found in the common meat-eating pet owner. They will love their dog or cat, but at the same time are perfectly happy to eat a cow or pig – animals having no less intelligence or capacity for experiencing pain. Though a difficult analogy to make, in the human social dimension this moral reasoning would be the equivalent of loving African Americans while thoughtlessly exploiting Asian Americans. This doesn’t mean speciesists are cold, heartless people. It simply means they don’t think clearly about their moral stances, or, if they do, don’t seek to rectify the contradictions arising from them.

Granted, nobody’s perfect, but this unclear ethical thinking has even led people so far as to use the possession of language as a yardstick for measuring a being’s moral worth. Language, it is claimed, is the only way a being can have interests; if a being cannot express itself, then how can we know what its interests are? In response to this argument it would be utterly senseless to deny that human language is, in fact, a unique expression of our ability to think and communicate in abstract,

creative ways. However, how can we really say that other animals – especially the ‘higher’ mammals such as chimpanzees – do not have their own set of verbal complexities unique to their particular species? Only hubris could allow us to think this, especially given the accumulating pile of evidence to the contrary.

Furthermore, my aliens example shows that it is possible for a species to have interests and rights even if it doesn’t have a common language with which to express them to its oppressors. But if so, then how can we know these interests in the case of, say, animals, and adapt our



ethics accordingly? First, we have to accept that it is somewhat difficult to speak of a being's 'interests' in ethical terms if this being is an infant, intellectually-challenged adult human, or nonhuman animal. Nonetheless, it is not impossible to discover what a being's interests are. In fact, we seem to inherently know these interests every time we bring a child into the world and raise it to adulthood. An infant cannot express its interests to us, yet somehow we know that healthy food, love, and safe, comfortable habitation are essential to its development.

With similar knowledge we can know a nonhuman animal's interests. For instance, if we want to speak of a butterfly or coyote's interests we don't have to ask them what they are, for this is obviously impossible. However, we can understand their interests both from a negative and a positive perspective. From the negative side we can, first and foremost, refrain from harming them – the most fundamental moral 'interest' of any sentient being. On the positive side, we can ask what their ecological and biological needs (interests) are, and how we can support those needs. What habitat and food do they require? How can we find creative ways to pursue our own needs without conflicting with their basic requirements for a sound habitat and food source? And so on.

Asking ourselves these questions helps to expand our concern for nonhuman animals beyond just domesticated nonhuman ones. As such, the answers illuminate the fact that wild native species should be given the same respect we might be inclined to reserve only for our domesticated pets or perhaps for animals raised for food and experimentation. In answering these questions we find that it is not difficult to have, at the very least, a certain scientific, or objective, empathy for all nonhuman sentient beings. Whether or not one makes the leap to a true ethical concern for nonhuman beings is something that may take time to develop. If one does decide that refraining from harming a nonhuman being is of ethical importance to them, such feelings will signal the beginning of a true 'respect for nature'. However, if one takes the next step and sees a nonhuman being's interests as related to one's own interests, then a true reverence for life will be taking hold.

All Beings Are Not Created Equal

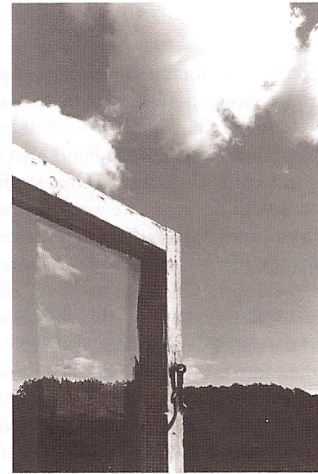
While the existence of language is surely an interesting theoretical issue in relation to ethics, it is, as we've seen, only incidental to the wider discussion of animal liberation. Even more pertinent is the issue of *sentience*, i.e., a being's self-awareness and ability to experience pain and suffering. The Princeton-based philosopher Peter Singer puts it this way: Since pain and suffering exist at more primitive levels of experience than that of language and speech, the mere presence of language does not mean that a being who can speak in abstract terms (a human) is capable of feeling more pain than one that does not (a cow). For example, infants cannot use language, yet we still recognize their experience of pain at levels equal to, or perhaps even greater than, adult humans. The same could easily be said of most of the 'higher' animals. Does this fact mean every being should be on an equal ethical level? No.

Animal liberation does not mean we equate the lives of all animals with those of all humans. This is where many animal liberationists fall off the tracks and lose their ability to think rationally. It is like the 'politically correct' argument that all

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humans are created equally, when we know good and well that some people have superior intellectual abilities, others have superior physical abilities, while still others possess superior creative abilities. Do these differences in ability mean we should revere the gifted and neglect those who are less gifted? In stark contrast to Richard Taylor's rather dark, and seemingly elitist, view of virtue ethics (Issue 39, *Philosophy Now*), I would say absolutely not.

While we should use sentience as the ultimate guide to our ethical decisions, we should not be afraid to distinguish between creatures that we know are highly aware of their existence (humans, whales, apes, for instance) and ones that are apt to live more according to biological instinct (such as starfish, worms or anemones). In line with this logic, we would not say that an inert object such as a rock has a moral interest, even though ecologically it may be in the interest of a certain animal species that a particular rock exist. On the other hand, we would say that a dog has a moral interest; dogs will avoid pain and pursue pleasure if given the option, and we can also easily speak of ways in which their interests can be aided or harmed. In fact, it is this self-awareness which expresses the fact that they have known interests. Tens of thousands of animal experiments are performed every year based on this very fact – as if we need to torture helpless dogs (as well as millions of other animals) to prove what any thinking human should already know.

In short, our ethics should be informed by an empathetic understanding of the pain and suffering we needlessly cause, of which current science has much to say, e.g. recent evidence found by British scientists that fish have a significant number of pain receptors leading to observable physiological responses to pain inducers.

Animal Experimentation: Science Gone Mad

In the past decade, the animals rights movement has made significant gains in convincing corporations to cease testing their products on animals. Unfortunately, the impetus for this change did not come from their sudden change of heart or gracious concern for animal suffering; it came from the outcries of millions of consumers sick of supporting an unnecessary and cruel system. In place of these barbaric methods, companies have put energy into developing alternative methods of making sure the products they sell are fit for human consumption or use. Regardless of these viable alternatives, the U.S. government and thousands of corporations still drip noxious chemicals in animals' eyes, force them to choose between electric shock and starvation, induce abnormal psychological stress or cancers, and/or remove their upper skulls in order to apply shock 'treatment' to their exposed brains – among many other experiments. In all this, experimenters themselves do not deny that the animals suffer great physical and mental pain. In fact, their testing presupposes this suffering; for if certain animals did not have similar physiological and psychological structures, all such testing would be rendered meaningless.

When discussing vivisection (the cutting of, or operating on, a living animal) and other forms of animal testing, the question inevitably arises as to when, if ever, such tests are warranted. Should we say "Never!" to all animal experimentation and institute a complete ban? Many, if not most, in the animal liberation movement would answer with an emphatic "Yes!" However, in addition to further aggravating an already divisive conflict between animal liberationists and experimenters –

including their corporate and governmental sponsors – this outright rejection supports the assumption on the part of the average citizen that animal liberationists are simply intractable and out of touch with reality. It is a sentiment summed up in words often thrown in the face of animal liberationists: "You love nonhuman animals more than you love your own kind!"

As an animals liberationist myself, I would love to be able to say 'never' to all animal experiments, but this sort of black and white thinking does not fully account for life's complexities. Nonetheless, it is worth stressing the fact that *most animal experimentation produces few benefits, and, more often than not, no benefits at all*. In fact, if the average citizen discovered how many millions of dollars are spent torturing animals in this country we would most likely find outrage from even those who never thought about the issue of animal liberation. As one top U.S. Food & Drug Administration official stated, "Twenty years from now, we will have killed millions of animals, spent millions of dollars, and we still won't know how endocrine disrupters affect humans. We need to take a step back and focus on what the problem is in humans." Who could offer a more damning statement regarding the 'educational' and economic wastefulness of this system than one of its chief overseers?

In our commodified culture, vivisection has become a system that, like special interest political contributions, is so entrenched that it seems unassailable. Much like special interest political contributions, if any mention is made of the negative aspects of vivisection, it is usually done in placating lip-service to temporarily quiet the protesters while attention is drawn to another issue. The entrenched economic interests constituting the animal experimentation system are guarded with the utmost secrecy, and not without good reason; experimenters rely on governmental and corporate funding for job security, while those supplying the animals for experimentation rely on the experimenter's funding.

One final fact about vivisection which makes it particularly hard to swallow is that much of the torturing and killing of animals is directed at researching health problems caused by poor diet, smoking and lack of exercise – in other words by human behavioral issues. What this means is that the pain and suffering we inflict on ourselves through our uninformed or indolent behavior necessitates an immense amount of suffering to the animal research subjects who have no choice in the matter. In the end, the animals end up paying for our laziness, ignorance and lack of will power. This is where the connection between animal liberation and diet comes to the fore. A plant-based diet is repeatedly proven the most healthy for the human body – one high in fiber, legumes, vegetables, fruits and complex carbohydrates, while low in cholesterol, saturated fat and, thus, meat and dairy products. It so happens this is also the exact diet which would liberate animals from our tyranny over them. We benefit, the animals benefit. And that, my friends, is the essence of animal liberation.

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Jeremy Yunt is an American scholar (though currently disgusted with his government) with a Master's degree in Ethics and Depth Psychology. His main interests are environmental ethics, Christian-Buddhist dialogue, and the thought of Paul Tillich and Carl Jung. He recently completed a screenplay about the life and work of one of his former professors, Dr. Jeremy Taylor, one of the world's foremost authorities on understanding dreams and their psychospiritual value.