Animal rights in historical perspective

Ethics and Animal Welfare 2001: Relationships between humans and animals, Stockholm, 29-30 May 2011 International Conference, hosted by Margareta Winberg, Minister for Agriculture, Food and Fisheries

Lisa Gålmark

What is a historical perspective? What does it mean to look at our time historically?

What is ‘animal rights’? Can ‘animal rights’ be said to differ from ‘animal welfare’ If so, in what way?

Is ‘animal rights’ a new concept of ideas? Did ‘animal rights’ emerge form the unique situation of today with human urbanization and industrialization of animal husbandry? Or can ‘animal rights’ be said to have a history in the Western world? Furthermore, will it, as a set of ideas and a practice, have a future?

The lecture seeks to place the concept of animal rights in a historical context. In so doing it also discusses the role and power of our present culture in relation to the situation of animals in agriculture.

*

Since the 1950’s, the global number of animals raised and killed for human food production has quadrupled. The worldwide number of animals killed for food in 1998 was 43.2 billion, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization. This included 290 million cattle, buffalo, and calves, 1.1 billion pigs, 802 million sheep and goats, and 41.1 billion chickens, turkey, ducks, and geese. The figures exclude some small countries and 'non-slaughter' deaths which are not generally reported.

In Sweden, to place us at the actual scene, animals as dead materia, as 'food', are more than ever on people’s plates, for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. One may of course wonder whether we are the bloodiest eaters of all in Swedish history: Did not the Swedish Vikings consume nothing but animal flesh, raw meat, and bloody grilled steaks? It is difficult to know for certain, but a recent archaeological study shows that the Vikings, contrary to the myth, consumed a lot more vegetables, herbs, and berries than is usually presumed.

Simultaneously with people most probably consuming more meat stuffs than ever, there is an increased interest in food without animal flesh; the so called ’vegetarian kitchen’. According to a SIFO investigation on behalf of Hill & Knowlton, published in the Stockholm morning paper Metro 16/9-99, 30 percent of the Stockholm population is what Metro called ”cheating vegetarians”, which means that they answered: 'Yes, I would like to increase my intake of vegetarian meals.'

Vegetarian Stockholmers or not, Vanja Lundby-Wedin, Sweden's head of LO, the labour union's organization with 2.1 million members, is a practising vegetarian, a fact very much overlooked by the media in comparison with the attention paid to the sympathetic statements about animals and vegetarianism made by Sweden's Prime Minister Göran Persson (the day before Christmas last year). It is hard to imagine anyone having missed what Persson said, while most people, including most of the Swedish press, missed the statement by Vanja Lundby-Wedin.

We seem to have a situation of increased polarization regarding how to feed ourselves. More and more animals are consumed, more and more people tend to be interested in not consuming animals.

Now, is this bewildered, somewhat paradoxical, situation something altogether new? And is the idea of not consuming animals a new thought? In Sweden there is certainly a strong movement for 'animal rights' (in Swedish 'djurrätt' or 'djurs rättigheter' or 'djurs frigörelse'), as is the case in the UK, in the US, in Australia, and, less known, in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. It is a movement that has grown since the 1970's. What seldom is recognized is that there are differences within this movement, quite big differences when it comes to ideology and practice.

I think one may distinguish between at least two main strands of thought.

The first one we will call 'animal welfare'. The animal welfare perspective focuses on pain. Animals, i.e., mammals and vertebrates, do have the capacity to feel pain, so they do have an interest of not being exposed to pain. Animal welfarists put strong emphasis on this interest.

The animal welfare ideology recognizes the power of man, the human species, versus the lesser power of other species. It also perceives man as inherently more important than other species; and as having more value than other species. Along with being powerful, more important, thus, more valuable, follows responsibility. Man should not misuse his power in relation to animals; man has duties towards animals not to inflict unnecessary pain.

Usually, this perspective focuses on physical pain. Animal welfarists' view is like that of the general political welfarists of today. In political terms it means reforming the system of animal husbandry. Transportation to slaughterhouses is to be improved, with water and more space, and not so long travel hours. There are to be larger cages, so that the animals cannot hurt themselves and others. It implies as painless slaughter methods as possible, less painful castration methods etcetera.

Animal rights, or animal liberation, is something quite different. Well, not altogether. Like animal welfare, the animal rights perspective considers animals' capacity to feel pain to be important. But for holders of this view, pain is not

necessarily something to be avoided. Pain is seen as a fact of life, a life preserving signal of warning, and something that makes us, both humans and animals, able to feel the opposite of pain: pleasure. Lust, pleasure, or joy, and pain are mutually dependent, in this view. Therefore, animal rightists do not focus solely on pain. Rather they seek to broaden the picture.

Many animals, for example all mammals in agriculture, have the capacity to feel not only physical pain, but also mental pain, mental distress, like anxiety, grief, loneliness, boredom, fear etcetera. Likewise, mammals have the capacity to feel joy, or what has been called 'funktionslust', the deep satisfaction of doing something the body and mind are well constructed to do. The problem here, and the key message of animal rights and animal liberation, is that this joy, or possibility of joy, of being alive and using one's body and mind to stay alive, presupposes a great deal of freedom. Without freedom, there are small chances of ever enjoying life fully.

So, from this perspective, it is principally wrong to keep animals in captivity. Like man; man as an extraordinary animal species, other animals long for freedom. Freedom can be given up momentarily, to gain something like food and shelter, but in normal cases it is not given up totally. A fox, used to freedom, would hardly stay in a cage of today's or yesterday's fox farms; an intensely bred cow would not want to let go of her calf, and she would hardly choose to stay inside in the same tiny place all winter long, eating and relieving herself in the same place; a pig would hardly want to be crammed with other pigs, day after day, in spaces that give the pig and his/her fellows one square meter each (the Swedish minimum size). And, most importantly, none of these animals, had they once enjoyed freedom, would voluntarily walk down the line towards death.

The endeavour for freedom and the will to live are deeply embedded in all animals. Animal rightists or animal liberationists say we should recognize this, as we recognize this longing within ourselves.

In practice, the animal rights or animal liberation ideology implies the end of animal husbandry as we know it. It means, not just animals being treated without direct infliction of pain, it means the giving up of human power over these animals' lives. No raising of animals for human (monetary) gains, no systematic slaughter for human food purposes.

Now, the consequences of the animal rights view seem radical enough, actually it seems so radical that we think these ideas are new, emerging from urbanization and the industrialization of animal husbandry during the twentieth century.

However, I suggest that these ideas are not an entirely new phenomenon in Europe; by talking about the movement during the prior fin-de-siècle (also by mentioning some scattered examples from Western history of ideas.) Animal rights arguments

have grown in force and in defenders no doubt, but the thoughts seem to be old. I will try to explain why we don't seem to know these ideas existed all along. Let us begin with a poem:

The Sending of the Animals

The Animals, you say, were "sent"

For man's free use and nutriment.

Pray, then, inform me, and be candid,

Why came they aeons before Man did,

To spend long centuries on earth,

Awaiting their Devourer's birth?

Those ill-timed chattels, sent from Heaven,

Were sure, the maddest gift ever given –

"Sent" for Man's usage (can Man believe it?)

When there was no Man to receive it.

(From *Cum grano, Verse and Epigrams*, by Henry S. Salt. Berkely Heights, New Jersey: Oriole Press, 1931.)

The author of this poem about humanity's relatively late arrival on the scene of the earth, Henry S. Salt, lived between 1851 and 1939. Salt was an author and academic, a former teacher at Eton and Cambridge in England, founder of The Humanitarian League in 1891. He and his wife Catherine Leigh Joynes, renowned feminist of her day, left the city for country life, sustaining themselves by writing books and growing vegetables. They were pacifists, ethical socialists, anti-vivisectionists, and vegetarians, working with the Social Democratic Federation, and the Fabians.

Joynes & Salt formed the Humanitarian league to promote reforms of every kind; land reform, prison reform, suffrage; they worked against the ill treatment of the poor in hospitals, against vivisection etcetera. Humanitarianism was the name they adopted for this philosophy. They argued, in Salt's words: '[Animals, as well as men, should be] exempt from any unnecessary suffering or serfdom.' For them it was not only the infliction of pain, but also the captivity and slavery, that was to be avoided. Among Salt's forty book titles, Animals' Rights, considered in relation to

social progress (1892), translated into Swedish in 1903 by Julie Blomquist, is one of the most famous and most influential in the animal rights movement

Mahatma Gandhi, George B. Shaw, Edward Carpenter, Lizzy Lind af Hageby, and Leisa Schartau were among the many intellectual friends of Joynes and Salt who became inspired by them and set out to pioneer the animal rights/liberation philosophy and practice. Shaw wrote: 'We were Shelleyans and Humanitarians … My pastime has been writing sermons in plays, sermons preaching what Salt practised.' (Shaws preface to Salt and his Circle. Winsten, Steven, London: Hutchinson & Co., 1951)

The Swedish ladies Lind af Hageby and Schartau, famous in Britain in their time, largely forgotten by mainstream Swedish history, organized the first mass campaign ever for animal rights. They were feminists, vegetarians and ’humanitarians’ taking over the political cause from Salt and Joynes. Both of these ladies were what we nowadays would call ’vegans’ (the word did not come into use until 1944), abstaining from the use of all animal products, and for example drinking orange juice instead of cow’s milk. 'Cow’s milk is intended for the calf,' as Lind af Hageby put it in a hearing 1903.

However, Salt, Joynes, Hageby and Schartau did not invent the animal rights philosophy. If the turn of the century was the beginning of modern intensive industrialization, and we might think these ideas grew out of a critical view on the whole of society and ways that were to come, there were forerunners much earlier in Western history of ideas.

(Of course, we must remember that the people and arguments mentioned here, are the ones that ’survived’: firstly, they were written down, secondly, they had the luck to be preserved, not destroyed, and not entirely forgotten. I imagine future historical research, when we are ready to discover and discuss this line of thinking, will come up with many more events, names, and written documents.)

The Humanitarians did not invent animal rights; they developed it from earlier thoughts and positions. In the first century, Plutarch (46-120) wrote Of the Eating of Flesh, the ethical wrongness to kill for food, in accordance with his general principle of kindness to all creatures, man and animals alike. Plutarch’s text is not widely known, despite, or perhaps because of, the fact that it remains to be perhaps one of the strongest pleas for vegetarianism in history.

Leonardo Da Vinci (1452-1519), artist and inventor, and his friend Tomasso Masini, were other forerunners, 400 years after Plutarch: Andrea Corsali, contemporary with Leonardo, writes in a letter from West India in October 1516 to Guiliano de Medici, count of Nemours, about a people on the Canary Islands whom he has met called the Guzzaretti: 'They are so kind and friendly not to eat anything

with blood, nor do they permit anyone to hurt anyone or anything living, just like our friend Leonardo da Vinci.'

Leonardo himself writes in his notebook (which amounted to 3 500 pages!): 'I have, since I was young, renounced the eating of flesh, and I believe one day people like me will look upon the killing of animals in much the same way as we now regard the murdering of people.' (Pers commun; letter 14/4-94 from Carlo Pedretti, Head of the Armand Hammer Center for Leonardo Studies at UCLA.)

Tomasso Masini, also known as Zoroastro, Leonardos friend and possibly also his lover, was an even more radical advocate for the well-being of animals. He dressed in linen-clothing and refused to wear leather, fur or anything that had caused the death or suffering of animals. Tomasso Masini, would he have lived among us, most likely would have called himself an animal rightist and a vegan.

So would most probably Lewis Gompertz 300 years later; Jewish author and inventor, anti-slave abolitionist, one of the founders of the animal welfare-organization SPCA (The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals) who resigned from The SPCA because he thought the organization's view and strategy on animal rights was too feeble. Gompertz, who lived between 1779 and 1861, called for radical reforms in general, practised vegetarianism, and even refused to use horse-drawn carts – a common mode of transportation in Gompertz' time. All slavery, be it man versus man or man versus animals, was to be abolished, according to Gompertz.

Now, why is this somewhat heretic tradition, of respecting animals fully, so little known? And is it necessarily combined with respect for all mankind, as seems to be the case in the cited examples? The philosophy of animal rights, as an ideology, appears to have a logic: the respect and reverence for all sentient beings, for all beings that can appreciate being respectfully treated and free, be it animal or man. The case of vegetarianism is slightly different. Vegetarianism is a habit that can be adopted for different reasons (health, economy, ecology, hygiene etc), and it can be combined with different ideologies. The ethnic mass murderer Adolf Hitler, for example, did eat vegetarian food from time to time, though his favourite dish was stuffed pigeon, hardly a vegetarian course. He also wanted to be seen as an animal lover, while simultaneously banning animal protection societies and vegetarian organizations.

Hitler is not alone in banning animal rights. Historically, up until today, Western culture has often responded to the ideas of animal rights and practices with silence, neglect, disrespect, ridicule and even violence. People have been silenced, by not being allowed to speak or write, or publish, people have been, and still are, even diagnosed as sick. An example is the famous author Franz Kafka who in a recent biography is said to have been a victim of a certain non-starving form of anorexia, meaning his well reflected ethical vegetarianism (!). Even today, people who refuse

meat are being ridiculed, and sometimes even forced to eat animals. At home, at schools, in prisons, in hospitals.

It may be that our dominant history, our failure to record other ideas than the winning and currently practised ones, has do with a lack of perspective. Our present culture may have difficulties seeing itself, and its history, as an animal-using/animal exploiting culture. In this situation, devoid of self-reflection, this culture still has difficulties acknowledging critique and alternatives to using animals.

The present culture harbours, I would say, a ’meat-norm’, 'meat normativity', as well as a ’hu-man-norm’, 'human-male normativity'. In a sort of narcissistic self-drowning our present culture cannot and does not see its own ways from the outside. When prevailing norms relate to other diverging forms, these forms tend to be devaluated. Animals, for example, are measured by the human male norm. Qualities which resemble ours, species that look and behave somewhat like us (humans), tend to be given a high value. Traits and species which do not look and behave and grasp the world around like us tend to be given a lower value or no value at all. Consider our different attitude toward chimpanzees versus cows. Or dogs versus pigeons or pigs. As the poet William Blake wrote:

'How do you know but ev’ry Bird that cuts the airy way,

Is an immense world of delight,

clos’d by your senses five?'

(W. Blake. 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell'. In Geoffrey Keynes (ed.) *Blake. Complete Writings*. Oxford UP, 1966, s. 150.)

Yes, how do we know that we have the sensory traits to even begin evaluating other species? Maybe we don’t have what is needed, at all? The prerogative to place a value on other beings and to act out this ascribed value is of course a result of our power. Which implies that the human male and meat-eating normative society is not able to see that its ways and norms have been chosen; chosen when residing in power. Rather it sees its ways as having been naturally evolved, as an inevitable development.

Still, when we look back upon the past, we do compare and judge. We do ascribe the opportunity to choose to past peoples and cultures: 'How could they commit such crimes, behave so cruelly, act in ways that we now condemn as inhuman?', we say. Seldom we imagine ourselves being looked at in the same way, compared, and judged by future generations, i.e., people, like ourselves, looking back at past times. The past time that is now our own time.

But our current time is no more natural law than yesterdays, and vice versa. However much we close our eyes and hold on to what always seems to have been, this fact will not change.

What is future? What is history and what is it not? History is not only something that kings and queens and politicians made in the First and Second World War, of course. For every alternative that we, each one in our society, decide upon; history is made. But we are not only making it, but we are also going to be judged by our making. This may sound trivial. The problem is that we do not seem to act as if we had grasped the meaning of our participation in the order of things.

What do we want people to say about us in the future? What will they say? Will they gaze in wonder, or will they shake their heads? Will they wonder how we could not relate to animals as other nations, as other peoples? Will they wonder how we did not see ourselves reflected in the eyes of the calf soon to be transported and killed in today's Swedish and European and Earth's slaughterhouses?

Or will they maybe not wonder at all and just condemn. History teaches us that chances are, that they, like us, will distance themselves all they can in respect to cruelties. In so doing, most probably, they will be right, and our dominant culture will be wrong.