

**Four Legs Good, Two Legs Bad:
The Anti-human Values of “Animal Rights”**

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If you are reading these words, you are a human being. That used to matter morally. Indeed, it was once deemed a self-evident truth that being a *Homo sapien* created intrinsic moral value based simply and merely on being human—a principle sometimes called “human exceptionalism.”

No more. Human exceptionalism is under unprecedented assault across a broad array of societal and intellectual fronts. Bioethics, as this journal has often described, is a primary example. The predominating view among mainstream bioethicists is that human life per se does not matter morally. Rather, to be considered a full member of the moral community, one must achieve the status of being a “person” by possessing sufficient cognitive attributes such as being self-aware over time or being able to value one’s life.¹

This approach creates a potentially disposable caste consisting of hundreds of millions of humans: all unborn life—early embryos may not have a brain, and fetuses are generally considered unconscious; infants—they have not yet developed sufficient capacities; and people like the late Terri Schiavo—who have lost requisite capacities through illness or injury. The point of personhood theory is insidious: It grants permission to kill human non-persons or use them as mere natural resources ripe for the harvest.

Bioethics is by no means the only existent threat to human exceptionalism and to its corollary, the sanctity/equality-of-human-life ethic. Materialistic Darwinism also denigrates the unique moral value of human life based on the philosophical belief that because human beings evolved out of the same primordial mud as the rest of earth’s flora and fauna, we are consequently not special or unique. The fervent embrace of human *unexceptionalism* led one Darwinian materialist to assert, “We are all of us, dogs and barnacles, pigeons and crabgrass, the same in the eyes of nature, equally remarkable and equally dispensable.”²

John Derbyshire, of *National Review* fame, has similarly written that a Darwinian understanding of biology leads to the conclusion that human beings are only “special in the way that an elephant is special by virtue of having that long trunk. . . . We are part of nature—an exceptionally advanced and interesting part, but . . . not *special*.”³ (Emphasis within the text.)

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A third equally dangerous threat to the equality/sanctity-of-human-life ethic—the subject of the balance of this article—comes from the animal-rights/liberation movement. Indeed, animal liberation is particularly subversive to our perceived status as a unique and special species because it advocates the creation of an explicit human/animal moral equality. Moreover, of the three threats to human exceptionalism I have mentioned (and there are others), only animal-rights activists engage in significant violence and lawlessness to coerce society into accepting their values. Thus, not only is animal-rights/liberation a unique danger to human exceptionalism (particularly among the young), but it also presents a potent threat to the rule of law.

The Ideology of Animal Rights

Defenders of the sanctity/equality-of-human-life ethic need to combat animal rights as forcefully as they do personhood theory. To understand why, we need to look past the public image of animal-rights/liberation groups, such as the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), as committed animal lovers who engage in wacky advocacy tactics such as posing nude to protest fur. For beneath this relatively benign facade lurks an ideologically absolutist movement that explicitly espouses equal moral worth between humans and animals.

What's wrong with wanting to protect animals? Absolutely nothing. Indeed, advocating for animal welfare can be a noble cause. But this isn't the ultimate agenda of animal rights/liberation. Thus, to understand the profound threat the movement poses to human exceptionalism, it must be distinguished from the animal-welfare movement.

The first distinguishing factor between animal rights and animal welfare is that, unlike the former ideology, the latter approach accepts human exceptionalism. As a consequence, animal welfarists argue that while human beings may have a right to use animals for our betterment and enjoyment, we also have a fundamental duty to do so in a proper and humane manner. Welfarists also believe we have a human duty to prevent unnecessary animal suffering. Thus, they engage in activities such as neutering feral cats and campaigning on behalf of more humane methods of slaughtering food animals.

In contrast, animal rights/liberation—while often engaging in welfare-type actions—is actually a radical departure from animal welfare. Whereas welfarists urge steady improvement of our treatment of animals and take actions to reduce animal suffering, the goal of the liberationists is to completely *end* every human use of animals. Thus, Gary L. Francione, director

of the Rutgers University Animal Rights Law Center, seeks the eradication “of the property status of animals.”⁴ In his view there should ultimately be no domesticated animals. Similarly, PETA asserts that “animals are not ours to use—for food, clothing, entertainment, experimentation, or any other reason.”⁵

To truly understand the subversive nature of the animal-rights philosophy, we have to look deeply into the movement’s ultimate beliefs. For example, is the life of a monkey as precious as that of a human being? Animal-rights believers say yes. Is butchering a cow morally equivalent to lynching a black man during the Jim Crow era? PETA’s “Animal Liberation Project” explicitly stated that it is.⁶ Is artificially inseminating turkeys the moral equivalent of rape? Yes, according to Gary Francione, who criticized Peter Singer (and a colleague) for participating in a turkey-insemination demonstration. “I suggest that there is no non-speciesist way to justify what Singer and Mason claim to have done,” Francione raged, “without also justifying the rape of a woman, or the molestation of a child, in order to see what those acts of violence ‘really involved.’”⁷ Many animal-rights activists and academics assert that animals should be considered “persons” with legal rights including full standing in the courts. Legislation will soon be introduced in Spain to grant full personhood rights to great apes.⁸

We cannot fully comprehend why animal liberationists believe these things—and why the most radical among them act violently against those they consider animal abusers—without understanding that liberationists *fervently* reject any hierarchy of moral worth between humans and animals. And this raises an important question: If being human does not convey moral worth to the liberationist, what does?

Space doesn’t permit a complete exposition of all aspects and every nuance of animal-rights ideology. For our purposes, it is sufficient to explore the two primary ideological approaches: one that focuses on sentience as the source of moral value, and another that focuses on what has been called “painience,” that is, the ability to feel pain.

Rutgers’s Gary Francione is the best-known animal-liberation theorist advocating sentience as the primary measurement of moral value. “I argue that all sentient beings should have one right: the right not to be treated as our property—the right not to be valued exclusively as means to human ends,” Francione stated in an interview.⁹ (For these purposes, sentience can be defined as “a state of elementary or undifferentiated consciousness.”)¹⁰ In this view, since animals are not unconscious, they have a “right” not to be used instrumentally. Hence, each and every human use of animals—no matter how seemingly benign—is as wrong as if the same use were made of a non-consenting human being. Thus, to the true liberationist, cattle ranching is as

odious as slavery because cows and humans are both sentient beings.

The second primary approach to crafting moral equality between humans and animals takes a slightly different trail to arrive at the same anti-human destination. In this view, if a being is capable of feeling pain, that attribute alone creates “equality of the species.” Richard Ryder, a former professor at Tulane University, has written that the ability to feel pain—a capacity he calls “painience”—is what confers moral worth. Since animals can feel pain, he writes, the goal should be to “gradually bring non-humans into the same moral and legal circle as ourselves,” toward the end that we “will not be able to exploit them as our slaves.”¹¹

PETA adopts the same concept in a slightly broader fashion. The issue for PETA is not just pain per se, but existential as well as physical suffering. Since PETA asserts that any use of animals by humans causes suffering, the group opposes sheep raising and wool shearing, eating dairy products, zoos, medical research using animals—even seeing-eye dogs. Or as Ingrid Newkirk, the head of PETA, once infamously stated, “There is no rational basis for saying that a human being has special rights. A rat is a pig is a dog is a boy.”¹² Illustrating the profound harm to human welfare that would result from society’s acceptance of animal-rights/liberation ideology, when Newkirk was asked if she would sacrifice five thousand rats or chimpanzees if it would result in a cure for AIDS, she retorted, “Would you be opposed to experiments on your daughter if you knew it would save fifty million people?”¹³

At this point, we need to consider the beliefs of Peter Singer, who is often called the godfather of animal rights because his 1975 book *Animal Liberation* is widely seen as having jump-started the modern movement. But unlike the true animal liberationist, Singer is not explicitly opposed to all animal research, or even, necessarily, to the eating of meat. (For example, he recently approved of using monkeys in Parkinson’s disease research.¹⁴) Instead, Singer is an “interest utilitarian,” that is, he believes that actions are not right or wrong per se, but must be judged upon their anticipated or actual consequences. Under this view, those actions which best serve the interests of most (not necessarily human) beings are those that should be pursued.

Utilitarianism isn’t new, of course. But Singer became notable by asserting in *Animal Liberation* that the interests of animals should be given “equal consideration” to the interests of people in making utilitarian analyses. To do otherwise, he declared, is “speciesism”—that is, discrimination against animals—a wrong as odious in his view as racism and sexism.¹⁵ Thus, when Singer was told recently that experiments on 100 monkeys benefited 40,000 people, he decreed that the experiment was “justifiable.”¹⁶ But he would

almost surely have said the same thing if the experiment had been with cognitively disabled human beings, since the interests of the many were served by using those with lesser capacities. Indeed Singer once suggested that cognitively disabled people, rather than chimps, should have been used in hepatitis-vaccine experiments—because the human beings have lower capacities than normal chimpanzees.¹⁷

A Campaign to Diminish the Intrinsic Value of Human Life

It is tempting to dismiss such assertions and beliefs as being so far into fringe territory that they are not worthy of serious concern. I believe the contrary is true. For many years the argument over animal rights has been generally one-sided: Supporters are vocal and energized, while those who oppose according animals “rights” are generally subdued. As a consequence, animal-rights values are seeping into public consciousness. For example, a 1995 Associated Press poll found that 67 percent of respondents agreed with the statement “an animal’s right to live free of suffering is just as important as a person’s right to live free of suffering.”

More worrisome, animal-rights/liberation ideology seriously threatens to undermine human exceptionalism—especially with the young, among whom liberationists make their most intense conversion efforts. PETA is particularly active in this regard. As the largest international animal-rights advocacy group, with hundreds of thousands of dues-paying members and a big following among the Hollywood set, in 2004, PETA received contributions of \$27.8 million. More than 30 million people viewed its websites and the organization sent out monthly e-news action alerts to more than 200,000 subscribers. Its media department booked more than 2,700 interviews for its representatives. And PETA is targeting the young: Its education department reached 235,000 teachers and *11 million* students with educational materials, also sending out 332,000 copies of *Grr!* magazine to kids and teens.¹⁸

PETA’s advocacy can only be described as profoundly misanthropic in that it literally equates the worst evils perpetrated by the most notorious governments with normal practices of animal husbandry. PETA’s infamous “Holocaust on Your Plate” pro-vegetarian campaign is a case in point. For more than two years, PETA representatives literally toured the world—focusing most heavily on college campuses and places where young people gather in large numbers—arguing that eating meat and wearing leather were morally akin to horrors of the Holocaust.

This reprehensible message wasn’t presented between the lines or done subtly in the hope that the reader would infer the comparison. Rather, eating-meat-equals-killing-Jews was the explicit and unequivocal theme of the

entire national campaign. First, there were the pictures. PETA juxtaposed pictures of emaciated concentration-camp inmates in their tight-packed wooden bunks with pictures of chickens being kept in cages. In another truly despicable comparison (on several levels), a picture of piled bodies of Jewish Holocaust victims was juxtaposed with images of the bodies of dead pigs. (If the KKK did that, it would be called hate speech.)

The text of the campaign was just as offensive. In a section titled “The Final Solution,” PETA made this astonishing comparison: “Like the Jews murdered in concentration camps, animals are terrorized when they are housed in huge filthy warehouses and rounded up for shipment to slaughter. The leather sofa and handbag are the moral equivalent of the lampshades made from the skins of people killed in the death camps.”

Forget for the moment that Hitler was sometimes a vegetarian and that the Nazi government passed some of the most far-reaching animal-protection laws of the era. That PETA can’t distinguish between the unspeakable evil of the Shoah and animal husbandry reveals a perverted sense of moral values that is almost beyond comprehension. (PETA eventually apologized for “Holocaust on Your Plate,” but not because they realized they were wrong factually and morally for making the odious comparison. Rather, in a typical non-apology apology—entitled “An Apology for a tasteless comparison,” PETA’s executive director Ingrid Newkirk sought to justify the entire approach: “The ‘Holocaust on Your Plate’ Campaign was designed to sensitize people to different forms of systematic degradation and exploitation, and the logic and methods employed in factory farms and slaughterhouses are analogous to those used in concentration camps. We understand both systems to be based on a moral equation indicating that ‘might makes right’ and premised on a concept of other cultures or other species as deficient and thus disposable.”)¹⁹

A Movement Growing More Violent

The animal-rights/liberation threat goes far beyond the philosophical. Because animal rights/liberationists believe that slaughtering animals for food is akin to murder, and that medical research using them is morally equivalent to Mengele’s experiments in the death camps, violence in the name of saving animals is a growing threat. Indeed, according to John E. Lewis, deputy assistant director of the FBI’s Counterterrorism Division, animal-rights terrorism has become one of the FBI’s most urgent concerns: “One of today’s most serious domestic terrorism threats comes from special interest extremist movements such as the Animal Liberation Front (ALF), the Earth Liberation Front (ELF), and Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty

(SHAC) campaign. Adherents to these movements aim to resolve specific issues by using criminal ‘direct action’ against individuals or companies believed to be abusing or exploiting animals or the environment.”²⁰

While no one has yet been murdered (with perhaps the exception of Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn, who was shot to death by an animal-rights fanatic), harassment, intimidation, vandalism, and threats of violence and death have become routine tactics employed by the most radical activists against those they deem abusers of animals. For example, in the United Kingdom, a farm family that raised guinea pigs for medical testing was subjected to years of personal threats and property vandalism by animal liberationists who demanded they get out of the guinea-pig-raising business. The family had courageously refused to be intimidated, but when the liberationists *robbed the grave* of a beloved relative and refused to give the body back, they had finally had enough. Seeing no relief in sight, and desperately wanting to be left alone, the family gave in.²¹

In the U.S., the often-criminal activities of Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty (SHAC) epitomize the lengths to which some liberationists will go to impose their will on society. SHAC was formed to literally put Huntingdon Life Sciences, a medical-testing laboratory, out of business. Toward this end, SHAC pioneered a particularly insidious terrorist tactic called “tertiary targeting.” Here’s how it works: SHAC militants seek to completely isolate Huntingdon from the wider business community and thereby drive it out of business. To accomplish their mission, SHAC not only targets executives and employees of Huntingdon, but the company’s product and service providers, such as banks, insurance companies, auditors, etc. To force these companies to cease doing business with Huntingdon, SHAC websites identify targets, providing home addresses, phone numbers, and the names and ages of children and even where they attend school. Targeted people may receive anonymous death threats or mailed videotapes of family members taken by SHAC activists. Companies have been bombed. Homes have been invaded and vandalized.

The tactic is insidiously effective. SHAC and their allies have intimidated scores of businesses, including the auditing firm Deloitte & Touche, into cutting ties with Huntingdon Life Sciences. In the United Kingdom, so many banks have been intimidated from doing business with Huntingdon that the company has had to turn to the Bank of England for a commercial account. Even the New York Stock Exchange backed off on listing Huntingdon’s parent company in October, 2005—on the very day it was to be placed on the Big Board—after Exchange executives’ personal information was published on SHAC websites.²² (The company was finally listed in December,

2006, a never-explained delay of more than a year.)

With the notable exception of Francione—who laudably and unequivocally condemns threats and violence in the name of animal rights—the silence from most mainstream leaders of the movement in the face of such tactics has been deafening. PETA, for example, refuses to condemn SHAC and a similar outfit called the Animal Liberation Front (ALF), and has even compared lawlessness in the name of animal rights to the Underground Railroad and the French Resistance.²³ Worse, Jerry Vlasak, an especially notorious animal-rights leader, told a U.S. Senate subcommittee hearing that the “murder” of those “who hurt animals and will not stop after being told to stop” is “morally justified.”²⁴

Conclusion

Most people, particularly those in the pro-life movement, take human exceptionalism for granted. They can no longer afford to do so. The great philosophical question of the 21st century is whether we will knock ourselves off of the pedestal of moral distinctiveness. The stakes of this debate over human exceptionalism, which includes but is not limited to the animal-rights issue, could not be more important. After all, it is our exalted moral status that both bestows special rights upon us and imposes unique and solemn moral responsibilities—including the human duty not to abuse animals.

Unfortunately, the liberationists are oblivious to this point. By denying our unique status as human beings they dilute the very concept of evil and reduce it to the banal. Slavery is evil: Raising sheep is not even wrong. The Rwandan and Cambodian genocides were evil: Humanely slaughtering millions of animals to provide the multitudes with nourishing food is not even wrong. Rape is evil: Inseminating mares and milk cows is not even wrong. Mengele’s human experiments were pure evil: Testing new drugs or surgical procedures on animals to save children’s lives is not even wrong.

Even more fundamentally, the way we act toward one another and the world is based substantially on the nature of the beings we perceive ourselves to be. In this sense, the entire planet will rue the day that liberationists succeed in convincing society that there is no justification for the reigning hierarchy of moral worth. After all, if we ever came to consider ourselves as just another animal in the forest, that would be precisely how we would act.

NOTES

1. For example, see John Harris, “The Concept of the Person and the Value of Life,” *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal*, December 1999, pp. 293-308, and Tom Beauchamp, “The Failure of Theories of Personhood,” *Ibid.*, pp. 309-323.

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2. John Darnton, "Darwin Paid for the Fury He Unleashed: How a Believer Became an Iconoclast," *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 25, 2005.
3. John Derbyshire, "God and Me," *National Review Online*, October 30, 2006.
4. Gary L. Francione, "Animals as Property," 2 *Animal Law* i, 1996.
5. See PETA website, www.peta.org.
6. Maria Garriga, "Outrage on the Green," *New Haven Register*, August 9, 2005. See also, Wesley J. Smith, "Liberation Theology," *National Review Online*, August 4, 2005.
7. Gary L. Francione, "Abolition of Animal Exploitation," *The Abolitionist*, September 2006.
8. See Wesley J. Smith, "Let Great Apes Be Apes," *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 18, 2006.
9. "The Animal Spirit" website, "An Interview with Professor Gary L. Francione on the State of the U.S. Animal Rights Movement," found at: <http://www.theanimalspirit.com/garyfrancione.html>.
10. See Answers.com, <http://www.answers.com/topic/sentience>.
11. Richard Ryder, "All Beings That Feel Pain Deserve Human Rights," *Guardian*, August 6, 2005.
12. Interview in *Washingtonian*, August 1986.
13. Michael Specter, "The Extremist," *New Yorker*, April 14, 2003, p. 57.
14. Wesley J. Smith, "The Animal House Falls Apart," *National Review Online*, November 30, 2006.
15. Singer writes about speciesism ubiquitously. See, for example, the revised and updated Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (New York, Avon Books, 1990), Chapter 1, "All Animals Are Equal," pp. 1-23.
16. Gareth Walsh, "Father of Animal Rights Activism Backs Monkey Testing," *Sunday Times* (London), November 26, 2006.
17. Jill Neimark, "Living and Dying with Peter Singer," *Psychology Today*, January-February 1999, p. 58.
18. Source: "PETA Annual Review, 2004."
19. See, for example, Joseph J. Sabia, "PETA Cheapens the Holocaust," *FrontPage Magazine.com*, October 16, 2003. See also, Wesley J. Smith, "PETA to Cannibals: Don't Let Them Eat Steak," *San Francisco Chronicle*, December 21, 2003.
20. Statement of John E. Lewis before the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works, May 18, 2005. See also, Catherine E. Smith, "Threats.com," *Intelligence Report*, Southern Poverty Law Center, Summer 2005.
21. Peter Richards, "Animal Rights Militants Admit Grave Robbing," *Guardian*, April 11, 2006.
22. See Wesley J. Smith, "Wall Street Goes Wobbly," *Weekly Standard*, October 17, 2005.
23. Source: PETA Website, "Ask Carla."
24. Transcript: United States Senate Committee on the Environment and Public Works hearing, October 26, 2005.