



# Animal Ethics, Biocentric Environmental Ethics and Feminism

Prof. Kalechofsky's paper reminds one of a vivid impressionistic painting: it is a passionate (a complimentary term) indictment of vivisection and male domination and control and hints at strong historically and culturally evolved links between the two. Now, I am not an expert on the Victorian period, and insofar as the paper is historical and factual, there is little that I can or want to say about it, other than to attempt to clear up what I believe to be some misconceptions in another historical period on which she touches, the Ancient and Hellenistic one.

For instance, the assertion about "the Greek distrust of emotion, particularly sexual emotion, the view of orgasm as a form of madness..." needs some consideration. If it is madness, it is "divine" in itself, indubitably inspired by a god, Eros. One needs simply to recall the *Symposium*, or Plotinus' *Enneads* 1.6, 6.9 and parts of 6.8, to discover beauty and physical love depicted as a necessary first step to the "higher" life of the philosopher, the thinker, and the mystic, all of which are not purely intellectual, in the strictly "rational" sense modern philosophy might suggest, but intuitive as well. Both Plato and Plotinus viewed the love for embodied beauty as the natural beginning of love for higher harmonies. In Plato's case, Eros was the central figure of the dialogue, and "sexual love" had little or nothing to do with women anyway: sexual emotion, whether trusted or not, was primarily a step on the road to knowledge and virtue, for men by men. In Plotinus' case, the gender of the "embodied beauty" remains ambiguous, but the notion that matter is evil has disappeared. *Enneads* 2.9 ("Against the Gnostics") repeats and argues staunchly for one main point: if you treat or consider anything within the material, actual world as evil, you offend its

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## DISCUSSION

Source. All things in the world are — to some extent — good, because they flow from There (from the One, through the other Hypostases). Moreover, all matter is formed: for Plotinus all that is united in kinship and infused with intelligence. Even rocks, trees and streams, in fact, all nature contemplates (*Enn.* 3.8).

Kalechofsky is on more solid ground, however, when she points to the Stoics (and, I might add, the Cynics as well) as extolling self-sufficiency, non-involvement, and self-control as an ideal; compassion was a Stoic sin, and Plotinus himself speaks that way at times, suggesting that it perverts justice, which would eventually prevail, in this life or another, as part of the design of the universe.

On the other hand, even that emphasis on control is in fact limited to self-control; “mastery” is to be had over one’s own self, not others; and neither humans nor animals are really involved, except in the sense that we might speculate that sympathy might be equally out of place for either. Dombrowski, for instance, quotes Porphyry (Plotinus’ prize pupil) extensively on the connection between humans and animals, based on cosmic “sympathy.” He defends the differences between animals and plants: the latter have no capacity to feel or be afraid and thus cannot be injured, unlike animals who share these capacities with us.<sup>1</sup> Plotinus, of course, was known to have been, like Porphyry, a vegetarian.

Nor do I agree with the connotations of her assessment of Aristotle’s position. His view of nature as a “predatory hierarchy” is simply a factual observation of the interdependence between plants, animals and so on (and I will say more about this later).

The strongest point of Kalechofsky’s paper, I believe, and the statements I particularly want to focus on as central to our enterprise here, come when, after a description of the “technological aids” (such as rape-racks) and the conceptual framework of “overpowering” women in Victorian pornography, she says:

De Sade believed that nature was vicious and exulted in crime, and that he received his obsession from nature. Nature knows no such models as De Sade describes, but the modern world, in its admiration for objective cognition, does.

She goes on to emphasize that de Sade was “at all

times, even in the sexual act, the complete investigator.” She isolates, correctly I believe, the two main aspects of violence, coercion and ultimate disrespect for living creatures, whether human females or “lower” animals, as 1) the detached, impassive, objective, so-called “scientific” stance, and 2) the intrusion of the machine. The latter she also attests to in the last sentence of the paper: “we expect” machines “to tell us” what changes in male sexual response to sadistic pornography can possibly mean.

The first point she makes clearly shows that “detached” and “objective,” both prized characteristics of the revered scientific enterprise, are neither detached nor objective; that model and that stance simply manifest a clear subjective bias, one that emphasizes that lack of empathy is a “higher” male prerogative and that it is like “mere women” to be “emotional” or sensitive. This macho model of so-called scientific impartiality, of course, did not disappear with Victorian times; he is alive and well today, his stiff upper lip undiminished.

But it is in her second point, that is, in her distaste for power and the intrusion of controlling technologies, that one can perceive a theoretical grounding for an animal ethic. After speaking of the “profound and terrifying transformations” animals had to suffer as a result of the Industrial Revolution, Callicott, for instance, says:

The very presence of animals, so emblematic of delicate, complex organic tissue, surrounded by machines, connected to machines, penetrated by machines in research laboratories or crowded together in space-age production facilities is surely the more real and visceral source of our outrage at vivisection and factory farming than the contemplation of the quantity of pain these unfortunate beings experience.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, a whole host of philosophers have decried the dehumanizing effect of technology, from Heidegger’s indictment of “enframing” rather than espousing the behaviour appropriate to a “shepherd of Being,” to the “schizophrenia” engendering effect of corporate ideology (MacIntyre), to the “game playing” in business, where “good” only means a means to an uncritically accepted end (Ladd), finally leading to the *Arrogance of Humanism* (Ehrenfeld), which accepts intrusion and interference in nature as our natural right. But Callicott puts his finger on the clearest and perhaps the only way one can attempt to espouse and ground consistently both an environmental (land) ethic and an animal ethic — no

mean feat, as I discovered. I will not rehash the arguments Callicott presents to explain the surprising conflict between the two. It appears to be easier to move from the "top" down — so to speak — that is, to move from the so-called paradigm case of human beings by analyzing which aspects of the paradigm are relevant to moral consideration in order to show "comparable worth" in animals, than to take the opposite route.

It is exceedingly hard instead to go from an environmental position based on a land ethic to a position which supports animal ethics in an individual sense. The holistic ecologist starts from the opposite direction, that is from the value of and the respect for all nature. Humans and animals are reduced to the position of parts of a very valuable whole in which every tree, stream and grassy knoll is viewed as intrinsically as well as instrumentally valuable. I have devoted intrinsic value elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> Instrumental value arises from whatever ensures the continued health, integrity, diversity and beauty within the ecosystem of which it is a part. How then to argue for the individual rather than species-based rights of one of the components of the community, without thereby abandoning the general argument for respect, however it may be based?

It is important to note that even Taylor, who also makes "respect" his central notion, only deals with ethic nor any other that I am acquainted with, is fully adequate to deal with the problem of domestic animals (although Rolston suggests a helpful approach of which there is more below). I suggest an addition to both Taylor's and Callicott's argument which I cannot fully work out now but which seems to me to represent a possible way for a workable ethic. It seems inconsistent to work out an ethic of "respect," whether explicitly (Taylor) or implicitly (Callicott) for life and nature, and extending this respect only to its component parts while denying it to its processes and the ways in which it functions. Once again we need to allow an "is" to circumscribe at least the parameters of our "ought." Callicott is correct, for instance, in pointing out that the "liberation" of domestic animals would be disastrous from the standpoint of ecosystems as a whole and of the animals themselves.<sup>5</sup>

A theory following from a) respect, b) a simple but thorough awareness of the "is" involved, that is, of the circumstances and processes existing and possible in nature, and c) a recognition of the difference between "basic" and "peripheral" needs, as VanDeVeer has it,<sup>6</sup> might suggest the following

principle: All disrespectful interference is morally wrong, and technological intrusion is particularly vicious, as even further removed from a "natural" model, or at least a model compatible with the unfolding of natural processes. But limited, controlled, and respectful use of other entities within an ecosystem by human or others is not always wrong. Examples might be humans eating a normally caught fish or naturally grown chicken (but not "farmed" veal), cutting trees (but strip-cutting only) for non-trivial needs, a tiger eating an antelope, and an antelope grazing.



Carol Belanger Grafton.  
Old-fashioned Animal Cuts.  
New York: Dover, 1987.

A similar attitude can be found in what one Cree student of mine described as the "Pan-Indian" approach to the environment, and Chief Wawia of the Red Rock Band (North of Superior Ojibways) termed "always using only what I need on the trail, and leaving the rest for the man coming after me." Other Native descriptions of their life and rituals speak of asking its forgiveness before cutting down a ceremonial tree or completing the hunt and killing the bison. It might be true that it is "a dog eat dog" world, or at least a world of predators and hunted out there, but that is simply the way it is, not anyone's perverted pleasure or power-crazed game. A wolf's intraspecific respect for its mate, its young and its leaders does not carry on outside the species to hares or plants, but it also does not lead him to inflict pain

beyond what is necessary to his own most basic needs. The wolf will kill for meat, for his survival and that of his young, but not for dessert or sport or "science." We could show our respect for natural life in all its forms by not looking down on the wolf's ways as "inferior" or such that we should do "better," at least not in regard to the basic needs we share with him. This is not a call to regress to the cave, but it re-echoes Callicott's call to a healthy, fit and fitting life-style.

The sort of interference that even contemplates the possibility of changing the distinctive stripes of a zebra,<sup>7</sup> even in the interest of the better survival of the species, appears intuitively to be disrespectful, and as plain wrong as attempting to change the tendencies or character of the human race, even for its own "good" or better survival. Russow's "zebra" example does not show primarily, as she believes, that we can only care morally about individuals rather than species. It manifests instead an ominous belief in the "divine right" of humans to interfere in processes they only dimly understand, as Ehrenfeld for instance has amply proven.<sup>8</sup>

Even Kalechofsky seems prone to this malady to some extent. Aristotle was perfectly correct in seeing and describing a "predatory" aspect to nature. Hierarchical scales exist in ecosystems in general, interspecies and intraspecies as well (such as pecking orders, the status of individual wolves within a group and so on). He was obviously wrong in extending his observations to a normative assessment of the social world, basing himself primarily on his culturally bound understanding of women, for instance, as "weak." One might say it is both correct and natural to protect the weak and the incompetent, such as the newborn, but it is incorrect to extend this "protection" with its concomitant implicit depreciation to females of all species, since lionesses hunt and even bird ladies take turns out of the nest catching worms.

I am not alone in defending the role of the "is" in all ethical thought concerned with the natural world. Since I have completed these comments, I have found a similar position is held in the most recent work of Holmes Rolston, III.<sup>9</sup> As in previous papers, he emphasizes the role of the "is" in regard to the "ought" in environmental ethics. Speaking of our duties to higher animals, for instance, he asserts that we owe them no absolute duty to spare them all "innocent suffering," whereas we must spare them "pointless suffering." In extending what is in nature to the "natural" (as contrasted with the "cultural") in human beings, Rolston maintains that,

Humans are claiming no superiority or privilege exotic to nature. Analogous to predation, human consumption of animals is to be judged by the principles of environmental ethics, not those of interhuman ethics...What is in nature may not always imply *ought* (and may seldom do so in interhuman ethics), but *ought* in environmental ethics seldom negates what is in wild nature.<sup>10</sup>

Thus it is not in indicting naturalism (in Aristotle or other Hellenistic or Medieval thinkers) that we find the best road to a sounder ethical basis, nor are they the worse culprits as initiators of later disregard of animals, women and human and non-human emotion in general. I see the main source of the problem in the worship of science, a much later phenomenon.

It seems to me that Kalechofsky's point about machines is well-taken, and in that case it is the impersonality, the means/ends relations and the cult of efficiency and technology/science that are the worse culprits by far. But I am almost as repelled by attempts to make the natural world "nice" at the expense of their own true being. Of the two attitudes, that is, the callously exploitive one and the well-meaning paternalistic one, clearly the former is by far the more objectionable, but both are intrinsically and unforgivably disrespectful. Even if I could, I don't think I would find it morally satisfying to train or breed tigers to eat coleslaw or humans not to eat any animal protein at all. For the latter I would still see vegetarianism as far preferable even on ecological grounds, but I would also accept Callicott's three "best" approaches as sound,<sup>11</sup> especially for those who, like myself, might be allergic to beans and nuts, provided that the minimum is used and that it not be grown through "agribusiness" or through disrespectful practices. If some may find "respect" a strange word to use in regard to an entity toward whom a violent action might be aimed, one need simply recall the martial art practice of offering deep bows to opponents before fighting, a practice I do not view as self-contradictory.

I started my response to Prof. Kalechofsky by discussing some points of disagreement with her assessment of the Ancient and Hellenistic sources of the attitudes she so vividly outlines and vigorously attacks. On the other hand, I also stated my agreement with what I take to be her main points about the moral unacceptability of scientism and technologism, particularly when allied with sexist and speciesist leanings. I further sketched an argument to ground a position on animals which, while not in

conflict with some of her points, might also be compatible with the biocentric, ecological ethic I espouse and hope to work out more fully at a later date. This allowed me to support a view of Aristotle that is in conflict with that presented in her paper.

Has my response added anything to her views about the similarity between Victorian positions about women and animals and their possible common origin in male domination and the apparent sadistic quest for absolute power that she suggests? Probably not. But this appears to be primarily a question for psychology or sociology to answer in a historical context; that is a question from which a mere philosopher should abstain. □

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Dombrowski, D.A., *The Philosophy of Vegetarianism*, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst; 1984; pp. 76-79.

<sup>2</sup>Callicott, B., "Animal Liberation: A Triangular Affair," in *People, Penguins and Plastic Trees*, D. VanDeVeer and C. Pierce, Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1986, p. 196.

<sup>3</sup>Westra, L., See "Let it Be: Heidegger and the Future," *Environmental Ethics*, Winter, 1985, Vol. 7; "Shrader-Frechette, Risk Assessment and the Is-Ought Fallacy," *Agrarian*, Clemson University, 1987; "The Philosophical Understanding of Human Beings For an Ecologically Sound Ethic," for the 18th World Congress in Brighton, England, August 21-27, 1988.

<sup>4</sup>Taylor, P., *Respect for Nature*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1986; esp. pp. 294-296.

<sup>5</sup>Callicott, B., *op. cit.*, p. 196.

<sup>6</sup>VanDeVeer, D., "Interspecific Justice," in *People, Penguins*, pp. 58-61.

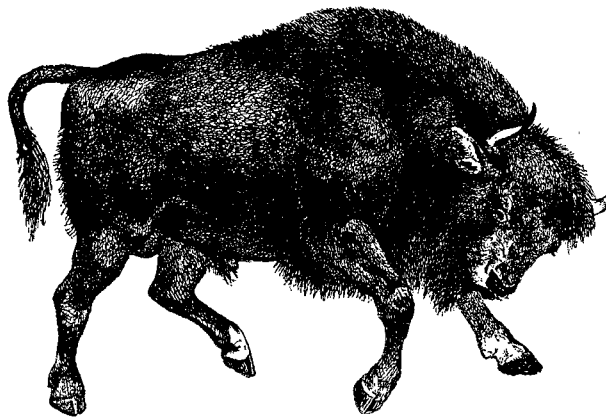
<sup>7</sup>Russow, Lilly-Marlene, "Why Do Species Matter?," in *People, Penguins*, p. 121.

<sup>8</sup>Ehrenfeld, D., *The Arrogance of Humanism*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1978.

<sup>9</sup>Rolston III, Holmes, *Environmental Ethics*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1987. See also my paper "Shrader-Frechette, Risk Assessment and the Is-Ought Fallacy," *ft. 3*, esp. pp. 59-60.

<sup>10</sup>Rolston III, Holmes, *ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>11</sup>Callicott, B., *op. cit.*, p. 197.



Jim Harter, *Animals: 1419*  
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