Animal Liberation: Do the Beasts Really Benefit?

Are You a Speciesist?

"When it comes to feelings, a rat is a pig is a dog is a boy."(1) That is the moral bottom line for Ingrid Newkirk, founder and director of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (or PETA). I intend to discuss in these pages the contentious issue of animal rights; yet for Ms. Newkirk the issue is settled: a boy has no more (and no less) rights than a rat.

Almost every week there is a story in the media about a research project stopped by an animal rights group, a protest against women wearing furs, a laboratory bombed by a militant animal rights activist, or a media figure protesting the conditions of animals on factory farms. What are all these protests about, and how should a Bible-believing Christian approach these issues? That is our subject in this pamphlet.

In 1975 Australian Peter Singer wrote a book whose title was to become the banner of a new movement: *Animal Liberation*. This book laid the foundation for most of the discussion since 1975, but it also set the tone of that discussion as specifically anti-Christian. Singer is quite clear about his distaste for Christianity: "It can no longer be maintained by anyone but a religious fanatic that man is the special darling of the universe, or that animals were created to provide us with food, or that we have divine authority over them, and divine permission to kill them."(2)

By using the echoes of specific passages from the Bible and claiming that only a "religious fanatic" could still believe them, Singer is making clear not only that his view is not

based on anything resembling a biblical worldview, but that, in fact, the Bible is the root of much of the problem.

It was Peter Singer's book that also made popular the rather ponderous term "speciesism." He writes of this as, "a prejudice or attitude of bias in favor of the interests of members of one's own species and against those of members of other species."(3) Singer says speciesism is just as bad as sexism or racism.

So what does "speciesism" really mean? If you think it's acceptable to test a medicine on laboratory animals before giving that medicine to a sick child or a cancer patient fighting for life, then you, too, are a speciesist. If you believe it is all right to eat meat or fish or shrimp, you are clearly a speciesist, just as guilty as someone who thinks that slavery is an acceptable way to treat another human being, according to Singer and others in the animal rights movement.

Why should Christians even bother to think about issues like animal rights when people are not even treated as well as animals in places like Bosnia or Iraq or many inner cities? Christians need to be actively involved in speaking out and acting clearly on this issue because the very definitions of humanity, of human dignity, and human responsibility are being rapidly reconstructed and any hint of man as created in the image of God or of a God who creates and gives value is seen as "speciesist" and dangerous.

Are We the Creation's Keeper?

The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them…. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. That's how God describes His coming kingdom in

Isaiah 11.

Clearly God is concerned for all the animals He has created, and they will share a future, a non-violent future, with us. But what of today? How does God intend us to treat animals now?

The animal liberation movement opposes favoring humans over other animals. “Speciesism,” they say, is treating humans as if they were more valuable than other animals. What does the Bible say?

God, in Genesis, tells us we have a responsibility as stewards to care for His creation. We are God’s representatives on earth, but we are not Lords of the earth. In Proverbs Solomon says that “a righteous man cares for the needs of his animal” (Prov. 12:10). It is a mark of righteousness that we give animals the care they need. But at the same time we must understand that both we and the rest of creation have value because a sovereign God created us and gave us value because He cares about us. Our value comes from God and not ourselves.

Our concern for animals does not mean we should give up the Bible’s insistence that we are unique in all of God’s creation because we bear His image, or that we should immediately eliminate all use of animals for any purpose and live resolutely vegetarian lives. What place, then, should animals have? In Matthew 12:11-12 Jesus berates the Pharisees’ willingness to help an animal on the Sabbath but not a human.

> *If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a man than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.*

Jesus’ point is clear: we should have compassion on animals in trouble, but have even more compassion for human beings, because they are “much more valuable” than sheep! But

Christians sometimes show little compassion for either.

As Christians we have often not lived up to our responsibilities to animals as creations of God. Frequently we have acted as if all animals are here **only** for our use, to do with whatever we wanted. We have taken God's statement in Genesis 1:28, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky, and over every living thing that moves on the earth," as giving us the right of despots, not the responsibilities of stewards. As Christians we have not set an example for the world of valuing the rest of creation because it belongs to God, and we have often abused the creation with no sense of damaging a creation that is not our own.

Next, we will look at what happens when people who deny God try to find an adequate basis on which to build value for themselves or animals, and how far into dangerous territory this can lead them.

From Animal Rights to Abortion: A Small Step from Man to Animal

"Six million Jews died in concentration camps, but six billion broiler chickens will die this year in slaughterhouses."(4) This is how Ms. Newkirk of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals sums up her outrage at the killing of animals. What happens when well- meaning people try to give animals value without God? Ms. Newkirk may think she has improved our view of chickens by comparing them to Jews who were killed in concentration camps. But actually she only trivializes one of the most brutish examples of evil in our century. In her view numbers are everything; if more chickens than people were killed, then poultry farming is worse than Nazi Germany.

What is the foundation of Ms. Newkirk's sense of value? She speaks of Peter Singer's book, *Animal Liberation*, as "the Bible of the animal-rights movement." Singer develops a purely

utilitarian view of the greatest good for the greatest number of beings that can experience pain. For Singer there can be no God over creation. He almost sarcastically says: "The Bible tells us that God made man in His own image. We may regard this as man making God in his own image."(5) So Singer turns to evolution to consider how we are related to other creatures.

Singer believes the evolutionary history of humans and other animals, particularly mammals, makes our central nervous system and theirs very similar. His conclusion? That many animals must feel pain like we do. Since we have no basis, in his view, to see humans as any different from other animals, if it is bad to do something to another pain-feeling human being, then it is wrong to do it to any other pain-feeling animal. The logic is simple, but it leads to just the kinds of confusion that cannot separate Jews dying in gas ovens from chickens dying in processing plants.

Where does a view like this ultimately lead? Singer willingly points the way in its application to new-born children. Writing for physicians in the journal *Pediatrics*, he shows how his ethic applies to humans,

> *Once the religious mumbo jumbo surrounding the term "human" has been stripped away…we will not regard as sacrosanct the life of each and every member of our species, no matter how limited its capacity for intelligent or even conscious life may be.(6)*

With chilling clarity, Singer says that once we come to his position of valuing a life only if it meets certain requirements, it is much easier to take the life, not only of the unborn, but of those who have a "low quality of life." He argues for the right to take the lives of new-born children who do not have certain capacities for "intelligent or even conscious life." Singer concludes:

> *If we can put aside the obsolete and erroneous notion of the sanctity of all human life,…it will be possible to approach these difficult decisions of life and death with the ethical sensitivity that each case demands, rather than with a blindness to individual differences.(7)*

In other words, if a baby does not measure up to Singer's standards, it is not kept alive. The values of animal rights, applied to people, lead coldly to abortion and euthanasia.

While there are many areas where Christians might disagree with the animal rights movement, one might well ask, Have we Christians lived up to the responsibilities God gave us towards animals?

Are Farm Animals Just Machines?

After the Flood, God tells Noah: "Everything that lives and moves will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything." God also makes a covenant, not only with Noah, but "with every living creature that was with you—the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you—every living creature on earth" (Gen. 9:3, 10).

So, while there is no question that God has given us permission to eat meat, we must also remember that we are moving towards a kingdom in which, as we saw in Isaiah 11, all of creation will live at peace with one another. So what should we be doing now, as we await perfection?

We have already looked at problems with the animal rights position. On the other hand, there are some uses of animals that should cause Christians significant concern.

One of the great changes in Western economies has been the change from the small family farm to the huge "agribusiness." With this change has come not only increased production and

lower food prices, but the treatment of animals as machines and land as a commodity. One area where animal rights activists have done commendable work is in showing the appalling conditions under which most farm animals now live.

Chickens live in battery cages that, on average, allow them only 36 to 48 square inches. This means that two chickens live in less space than a page of paper. Generally four or five chickens share a cage, so that they must almost physically live on top of each other. Does this sound like what Solomon means when he said that "a righteous man cares for the needs of his animal"?

As one other example, pigs too are treated as machines to produce food. The United States Department of Agriculture tells farmers: "If the sow is considered a pig manufacturing unit, then improved management…will result in more pigs weaned per sow per year." This is surely not man acting as a good steward of created beings that belong to God. The decline of any belief in God has been accompanied by a decline in any attempt to treat animals on farms as anything other than "manufacturing units" to be treated in whatever way will cause them to produce the most.

If we truly believe what the Psalmist says, that "The earth is the LORD's and all it contains" (Ps. 24:1), then we must not accept how those who do not believe this have acted. While we are directly given permission in Scripture to eat meat, it might well make a great difference in how animals are treated if Christians choose not to buy from those meat producers who do not tend to their animals as if they really did belong to God.

In the same way that if we believe in the sanctity of human life we must stand against abortion, so too, if we believe that "the earth is the LORD's" then we must consider whether we can support those who do not treat animals as animals but only as "manufacturing units."

I want to conclude this discussion with some suggestions about how we can both uphold the uniqueness of humans and stand against the mistreatment of God's creation.

Recovering the Creation as Compassionate Stewards

I have pointed out the disturbing consequences of abandoning the biblical view that humans are created in the image of God. As theologian and social critic Richard John Neuhaus perceptively puts it: "The campaign against `speciesism' is a campaign against the singularity of human dignity and, therefore, of human responsibility…. The hope for a more humane world, including the more humane treatment of animals, is premised upon what [animal rights activists] deny."(8)

If we are merely animals, we have no reason to be less species- ist than other animals. Dogs show no concern for the welfare of cats. If we are moral in a way that other animals cannot be, then we are both different from other animals and responsible to God for that difference. Because we have a spiritual aspect that no other animal shares, what the Bible calls the "image of God," we also have a responsibility to care for what God has entrusted to us. How should we live out that responsibility?

First, we must live in obedience to Jesus Christ. It was Jesus who reminded us that God clothes even the grass as an example of His care for all His creation. We need to demonstrate in our actions and in how we teach our children that we, too, consider all of God's creation as something that shows His glory.

Secondly, we must consider what our own role is as God's stewards. Just as not all are called to give their lives in vocational missionary service, so, too, not all are called to be full-time activists for better treatment of God's creation. But we are all called to be missionaries, and we are all

called to be stewards and not spoilers of the natural world.

Medical research and experiments on animals provide an excellent place for Christians to be proactive. Animals must be humanely treated, but at the same time we have much to learn about the treatment of cancer, diseases of the nervous system, and the management of serious injuries from animal experiments. If a cure for AIDS or any one of a number of genetic diseases is to be found, it should first be tested on animals. However, just as on farms, we have a duty as stewards to see that animals are treated with the respect due them as part of God's creation. Like Jesus, who regarded helping the sheep out of the well as more important than keeping the Sabbath, so too we must speak out strongly for the humane treatment of animals whenever they are used by humans.

We have been given the right and the responsibility to rule over the earth by its Owner, God. Once Christians led in this area, starting the whole movement for the humane treatment of animals. Now we have little to say to our culture about real stewardship. We must read our Bibles carefully and prayerfully consider how God would have us help recover His creation. Animals may not have rights, but we as Christians clearly have responsibilities to them.

As Christians we must stand for man as created in the image of God and His creation as a reflection of His glory. Let us say with the Psalmist: "How many are your works, O LORD! In wisdom you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures" (Ps. 104:24).

Notes

1. Ingrid Newkirk cited in Charles Oliver, "Liberation Zoology," *Reason* (June 1990), p. 22.
2. Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (New York: Avon Books, 1975), p. 215.
3. Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation*, new revised ed. (New York:

Avon Books, 1990) p. 6.
4. “Liberation Zoology,” p. 26.
5. *Animal Liberation*, new rev. ed., p. 187.
6. Peter Singer, “Sanctity of Life or Quality of Life,” *Pediatrics* (July 1983), pp. 128-29. (Cited in Francis Schaeffer, *The Great Evangelical Disaster*.)
7. Ibid.
8. Richard John Neuhaus, “Animal Lib,” *Christianity Today*, 18 June 1990, p. 20.

See Also *Probe Answers Our E-Mail:*

- What’s Up with Animal Rights?

©1994 Probe Ministries.