

Bienestar animal (2007)

Practica 1: Contexto

Aula informática, X 12-14h00, morris.villarroel@upm.es

What humans owe to animals

Economist magazine (August 19th 1995)

Spare a thought for the hen that laid your breakfast. The odds (85% in Britain, 95% in America) are that she is a battery hen. She is confined to a tiny cage with four or five others for her entire adult life. **Instinct leads hens to scratch in earth, to perch and spread their wings**; the average egg-layer will do none of these. Instead she is squeezed into a space smaller than an 8x10 photo, barely enough to move. She may exercise her pecking instinct by pecking out her neighbors' feathers-unless her beak has been cut off with a red-hot blade, probably causing pain for life.

Many people are increasingly troubled by the treatment of animals in modern "intensive farming" and in scientific research. Gathering steam for two decades, the issue of animal welfare has reached boiling-point in Britain; much more will be heard about it elsewhere as well.

It is a debate that seems to **frown on moderation**. At the extremes are minorities with views that are implacably opposed. One cannot expect a friendly exchange of opinion between those who regard factory farming as a "holocaust" and those who think it raises no moral issues at all. The trouble is, **anybody who thinks hard about the matter seems drawn to one of these positions**. This surrender of the center to apathy and confusion is a recurring feature of the most difficult moral debates. In this case, at least, there is no need for it. **The muddled moderates are on firmer ground than the extremists think**, and it is worth understanding why.

-The missing middle-

Do animals have rights? This is how the question is usually put. It sounds like a useful, ground-clearing way to start. Actually, it isn't, because it presupposes an agreed account of human rights, which is something the world does not have.

On one view of rights, to be sure, it necessarily follows that animals have none. Some philosophers argue that **rights exist only within a social contract**, as part of an exchange of duties and entitlements. Therefore, animals cannot have rights. **The idea of prosecuting a tiger that kills somebody is absurd**; for exactly the same reason, so is the idea that tigers have rights. However, this is only one account, and by no means an uncontested one. It denies rights not only to animals but also to some people-for instance, **to infants**, the mentally incompetent and future generations. In addition, it is unclear what force a contract can have for people who never consented to it: how do you reply to somebody who says, "I don't like this contract"?

The point is this: without agreement on the rights of people, arguing about the rights of animals is fruitless. It polarises the discussion at the onset. **It invites you to think that animals should be treated either with the same consideration humans extend to other humans, or with no consideration at all. This is a false choice.** Better to start with another, more fundamental, question: is the way we treat animals a moral issue at all?

Many deny it. Arguing from the view that humans are different from animals in every relevant respect, extremists of this kind think that animals lie outside the area of ethical choice. Any regard for the suffering of animals is seen as a mistake-a sentimental displacement of feeling that should properly be directed to other humans.

This view, which holds that **torturing a chimpanzee is morally equivalent to chipping wood**, may seem bravely "logical". In fact it is simply shallow: the muddled center is right to reject it. **The most elementary form of moral reasoning-the ethical equivalent of learning to crawl-is to weigh others'**

interests against one's own. This in turn requires sympathy and imagination: without which there is no capacity for moral thought. To see an animal in pain is enough, for most, to engage sympathy. When it happens, it is not a mistake: it is mankind's instinct for moral reasoning in action, an instinct that should be nurtured rather than mocked.

But where does this lead? First, to the view that a conscientious disregard for the suffering of animals is not merely ugly but wrong. Quite possibly, one day, to a conviction that our treatment of animals is outrageous. Historically, man has expanded the reach of his ethical calculations, as ignorance and want have receded, first beyond family and tribe, later beyond religion, race and nation. To bring other species more fully into the range of those decisions may seem unthinkable to moderate opinion now. One day, decades or centuries hence, it may seem no more "civilized" behavior requires.

Today there is no such clarity, nor any prospect of it-only a befuddled consensus in many rich countries that "needless" suffering by animals should be avoided. This supports laws regulating the way farm animals are kept, transported and killed. But what is "needless"? If the whole world insists on eating large quantities of today's foods as cheaply as it does now, industrialized farming is at present the only option. Every day Americans slaughter 25 million chickens and Europe consumes 340 million eggs. To satisfy those appetites in a way that affords the animals anything like a natural life would make roast chicken and omelettes much dearer. A Swedish company has developed a factory farm that provides cattle with ample food, water, space and cool air on their long journeys across Europe: cost, \$200,000. Is that reasonable? If farmers lose jobs and poor people eat less meat, are those prices worth paying?

So long as human beings remain as deeply divided as they are on these points, the answers must remain a matter of personal conscience. Governments should act only when consensus is broad and firm; for the moment, the moral price of eating meat or wearing fur is for individuals to weigh. People who deplore hunting must be free to lobby against it. Only when they change enough minds should governments act.

One thing more, however. It is all very well to say that individuals must wrestle with their consciences-but only if their consciences are awake and informed. Industrial society, alas, hides animals' suffering. Few people would themselves keep a hen in a shoebox for her egg-laying life or kill the animals they consume; but practically everyone will eat smartly packaged, "farm fresh" eggs from battery hens. Many people who wear fur-lined gloves have barely heard of leghold traps, much less seen one in use; milk drinkers do not see the calves torn from their mothers that are then killed and renamed as veal.

A right-minded regime for animals ought to help to pierce the veil of ignorance about what happens to them, and yet leave the questions of conscience mainly in the realm of individual choice. This is beginning to happen. In Britain, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals is pioneering "Freedom Food", a program begun last year in conjunction with two top supermarket firms. Farm operations that meet the society's guidelines for humane farming (no battery cages, for instance) can use the "Freedom Food" logo-and many consumers, it turns out, will pay more for food so marked. The scheme is policed by the RSPCA and paid for by participating farmers. It has many advantages. It keeps standard-setting in respected private hands, beyond the reach of lobbies; it imposes no uniform standards where there is no consensus. Above all, it tells consumers that there is a moral choice to be made.

In Britain, Freedom Food is still a small effort, but its way of approaching the problem -voluntary and morally educative rather than coercive and morally dictatorial -points the way. The RSPCA reports inquiries from would-be imitators around the world. It is a civilized-and civilizing beginning.

