

The Rhetoric of Apology in Animal Rights: Some Points to Consider

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Several years ago I published an article in *Between the Species* entitled "The Otherness of Animals" (Fall 1988). In it, I urged that in order to avoid contributing to some of the very attitudes towards other animals that we seek to change, we need to raise fundamental questions about the way that we, the defenders of animals, actually conceive of them. One question that needs to be raised concerns our tendency to deprecate ourselves, the animals, and our goals when speaking before the press and the public. Often we "apologize" for animals and our feelings for them. In *Between the Species*, I argued, "Anxious not to alienate others from our cause, half doubtful of our own minds at times in a world which views other animals so much differently than we do, we are liable to find ourselves presenting them apologetically at Court, spiffed up to seem more human, capable, ladies and gentlemen, of performing Ameslan [American sign language] in six languages. . . ."

We apologize in many different ways. More than once, I have been warned by an animal protectionist that the public will never care about chickens, and that the only way to get people to stop eating chickens is to concentrate on things like health and the environment. However, to take this defeatist view is to create a self-fulfilling prophecy. If we, the spokespersons for animals, decide in advance that no one will ever really care about them, we will convey this message to the public. Insisting that others will never care about chickens projects the feeling, "I don't think that I can ever care much about chickens."

This negative attitude about chickens epitomizes the apologetic mode of discourse in animal rights. It is the "I know I sound crazy, but . . ." approach to the public. If we find ourselves "apologizing" for other animals, we

need to ask ourselves why we do this. Is it an expression of self-doubt? A deliberate strategy? Either way, I believe that the rhetoric of apology harms our movement tremendously. Following are some examples of what I mean.

Reassuring the public, "Don't worry. Vegetarianism isn't going to come overnight." We should ask ourselves the question: if I were fighting to end human slavery, child abuse, or some other human-created oppression, would I seek to placate the public or the offender by reassuring them that the offense will still go on for a long time and that we are only trying to phase it out gradually? Why, instead of defending vegetarianism are we not affirming it?

Patronizing animals: "Of course they're only animals. Of course they can't reason the way we do. Of course they can't appreciate a symphony or paint a great work of art, but . . ." In fact, few people live their lives according to "reason," or appreciate symphonies, or paint works of art. As human beings we do not know what it feels like to have wings or to take flight from within our own bodies or to live naturally within the sea. Our species represents a smidgeon of the world's experience, yet we patronize everything outside our domain.

Comparing competent, adult nonhuman animals with human infants and people who are mentally defective. This is an extension of number 2. Do we honestly believe that all of the other creatures on earth have a mental life and range of experiences that are comparable to diminished human capacity and the sensations of newborn babies? Except within the legal system, where all forms of life that are helpless against human assault should be classified together and defended on similar grounds, this analogy is both arrogant and logically absurd.

Starting a sentence with, "I know these animals aren't as cute as other animals, but . . ." Do you say to your child, "I know Bill isn't as cut as Tom, but you still have to play with him"? Why put a foregone conclusion in people's minds? Why even suggest that physical appearance and conventionalized notions of attractiveness are relevant to anything that matters in a relationship?

Letting ourselves be intimidated by "science says," "producers know best" and charges of "anthropomorphism." We are related to other animals through evolution. Our empathic judgments reflect this fact. It does not take special credentials to know that, for example, a hen confined in a wire cage is suffering, or to imagine what her feelings must be compared with those of a hen ranging outside in the grass. We are told that humans are capable of knowing just about anything we want to know--except what it feels like to be one of our victims. Intellectual confidence is needed here, not submission to the epistemological deficiencies, cynicism, and intimidation tactics of profiteers.

Letting the other side identify and define who we are. I once heard a demonstrator tell a member of the press at a protest at a chicken slaughterhouse, "I'm sure Frank Perdue thinks we're all a bunch of kooks for caring about chickens, but. . ." Ask yourself: does it matter what the Frank Perdues of this world "think" about anything? Can you imagine Frank Perdue standing in front of a camera, saying, "I know the animal rights advocates think I'm a kook, but . . ."?

Needing to "prove" that we care about people, too. The next time someone challenges you about not caring about people, ask them what they're working on. Whatever they say, say, "But why aren't you working on _____? Don't you care about _____?" We care deeply about many things; however, we cannot devote our primary time and energy to all of them. We must focus our attention and direct

our resources. Moreover, to seek to enlarge the human capacity for justice and compassion is to care about and to work for people.

Needing to "pad" and bolster our concerns about animals and animal abuse. This is an extension of number 7. In keeping with the need to recognize the links of oppression and the indivisibility of social justice concerns, it is imperative to recognize that the abuse of animals is a human problem that is as serious as any other abuse. Unfortunately, the victims of homo sapiens are legion. As individuals and groups, we cannot give equal time to every category of injustice. We must go where our heartstrings pull us the most, and do the best that we can with the confidence that is needed to change the world.

The rhetoric of apology in animal rights is an extension of the "unconscious contributions to one's undoing" described by the child psychologist, Bruno Bettelheim.* He pointed out that human victims will often "collaborate" unconsciously with an oppressor in the vain hope of winning the oppressor's favor.

In fighting for animals and animal rights against the collective human oppressor, we assume the role of vicarious victims. To apologize in this role is to betray "ourselves" profoundly. We need to understand why and how this can happen. As Bettelheim explained out, "But at the same time, understanding the possibility of such unconscious contributions to one's undoing also opens the way for doing something about the experience--namely, preparing oneself better to fight in the external world against conditions which might induce one unconsciously to facilitate the work of the destroyer."

We must prepare ourselves this way. If we feel that we must apologize, let us apologize to the animals, not for them.

*Bruno Bettelheim, "Unconscious Contributions to One's Undoing," *Surviving and Other Essays*, Vintage Books, 1980.

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