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Chapter 2: Animal Rights Movement

The Future of Animal Rights

With over three decades of activism and organizing on its side, the animal rights movement shows few signs of diminishing. It is, however, likely to change as it grows. The 1980s saw the movement generating public awareness, the 1990s brought increased legal action, and the 2000s have led to budget-building and influencing public policy. The broad-based movement covers a whole range of organizations, some of which go by the name of animal rights, and some which might better be called “animal welfare” or “conservation” organizations. Establishing a firm dividing line between these different camps may be impossible. A no-kill animal shelter or rescue organization, for example, saves animals from dying, an approach most animal rights activists support, but such organizations employ sterilization, which some activists reject. Similarly, the Audubon Society protects migratory birds, but also comes into conflict with feral cat organizations. Sometimes tough judgment calls are required which weigh the current interests of an individual animal against its future interests or which weigh one species against another. The 2000s could be described as the unfolding or broadening of the animal rights movement to include a whole range of perspectives, suggesting that the movement might need a new umbrella term. Many groups that reject the use of the term “animal rights” for philosophical or strategic reasons might share a whole set of aims with rights organizations. A problem that the broad-based animal protection movement faces is how to best represent the diversity of views to the public and how to build coalitions with other organizations which might not share the exact same approach to a particular problem.

On the academic side of the animal rights movement, the utilitarian positions developed by Peter Singer and Tom Regan have opened a new sphere of serious inquiry into human attitudes towards animals. The perspectives of European (mostly French and German) philosophies are now being used to describe the relationships that people have with the non-human world. These philosophies do not look upon species as separate wholes but as relational spheres with significant overlaps. Such philosophy, along with feminist science studies, literary criticism, the sciences of ethology and biology, and the social sciences have given rise to a new field, yet to be fully defined, called Animal Studies, Anthrozoology, or Human-Animal Studies. Within this emerging field, the point of view of the animal, perhaps even the point of view of a particular species or even an individual animal, becomes a principle of interpretation, for re-reading human culture and human nature. This new field emphasizes the ways in which humans define their identities through affiliations and differences with their “companion species” and interprets the fields of philosophy, science, and theology to demonstrate how discourses of human superiority conflict both with basic evolutionary theory and with the actual practice of human beings over the millennia. The standpoint of dominion theology arising from Genesis one and two, which has often been an unstated background to work on animals in the humanities and sciences, now gives way to cultural studies of human-animal commonality and relationship. Scholars who adopt the animal studies approach study the representation of animals in film, artwork, and new media. They examine the interactions of people and animals in agribusiness and entertainment by describing human-animal hybrids and human-machine cyborgs and re-visit the canon of literature and philosophy to reveal how texts draw a false dividing line between the human and non-human. In contrast to the rather straightforward, rational discourse of animal

rights, animal studies creatively builds upon existing interconnections between people and animals and imagines new possibilities for human-animal bonds.

The new field of Animal Studies may or may not embrace a position of direct advocacy for animals. Some Animal Studies scholars believe that the work of criticism is itself a form of activism, as it is only through understanding historical precedents and hidden assumptions about animals that humans are able to reverse the violent and sacrificial attitudes towards animals that have prevailed in the past. Other Animal Studies scholars believe that the work of criticism must be supplemented with direct activism, and that action and scholarship inform one another. Like its animal rights predecessor, animal studies is not a unified field. It represents a diversity of perspectives, which sometimes conflict. The explosion of new literature in the past few years suggests that Animal Studies has arrived as a field with the emergence of new journals, conferences, and graduate programs devoted to animals. Animal Studies is now undergoing the same kind of transition that helped to foster programs in Women's Studies and Queer Studies around the world. It remains to be seen whether this movement will translate into actual benefits for animals in factory farming operations, laboratories, and elsewhere, but it seems likely that this academic trend will influence broader cultural perceptions. It will become increasingly difficult inside and outside academia to make claims for the absolute difference between people and animals or to justify outright exploitation and cruelty. Human exceptionalists (those who believe that the correctness of a particular action should only be decided based on the good of human beings) will find themselves confronted with a huge body of cultural and scientific evidence which suggests that human society operates within vast networks of relationship with the extra-human world. A consensus is emerging on a number of different fronts, which states that ethical decisions do not simply amount to choosing between human good and the good of

other creatures. Since human beings are immersed in networks of mutuality, it makes sense to consider the good of all creatures and not just the short-term gain of a privileged few.

Current trends in popular culture also are assisting a pro-animal rights agenda in reaching a wider audience. After years of scientific research and debate, Al Gore's documentary film, *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), along with high gasoline prices, helped catapult the long-standing discussion of global warming into the American public's awareness. Although this new environmental consciousness has produced consumerist applications, decried by critics as "greenwashing" (the tendency to market products as environmentally friendly without making substantial changes to the manufacture of these products), it remains likely that the U.S. political climate will change in ways to curb some of the worst environmental abuses. The animal rights movement may see some of the benefits in this change of consciousness as animal advocates and environmentalists increasingly work together on common concerns. Factory farming, which results in cruelty to animals, also produces harmful environmental impacts, and the two movements may begin to converge on issues like this.

Since the traditional use of animals for food and experimentation is so entrenched in Western society, both the environmental and animal rights movements face significant obstacles to widespread acceptance in the coming century. The dominion standpoint of earlier generations, in which animals and the earth are mere "natural resources" for human use, has prevented an examination of the intrinsic good of ecosystems and animals. Pharmaceutical companies, agribusiness, and industry all have made huge capital investments in the status quo, and most regard efforts to extend protections of animals and the environment with suspicion. Despite the presence of green evangelicals, many Christians in the United States believe in a theological imperative to dominate animals not amenable to discussion or evidence. Longstanding traditional

uses of animals for food, research, and entertainment do not seem likely to change even if alternatives already exist. As the developing world continues to model U.S. lifestyles, enormous ecological damage and animal abuse may ensue in the coming years. Activists and scholars who work on behalf of animals will generate more concern for animals in the future, so that the coming century may witness many pockets of improvement in the lives of animals. The term “animal rights” may fall out of favor, but many of the original aims of the movement will remain as goals for the next generation of animal advocates.

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Further Reading

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