

## HUMAN AND NONHUMAN ANIMAL RIGHTS AND OPPRESSION: AN EVOLUTION TOWARD EQUALITY

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### ABSTRACT

This paper is about oppression, a commonly-studied social phenomenon, but from the unusual perspective of the relationship between humans and nonhuman animals. Those with greater social and economic power are positioned to oppress, to define personal and social worth, and to deny basic rights and privileges. Some humans are more oppressed than others; for example, women, racial and ethnic minorities, the poor, the differently-abled, children, the aged, and prisoners. I describe stereotypes and unfair treatment as they are similarly applied to disadvantaged humans and nonhuman animals. A primary obstacle in discussing nonhuman animal oppression is the seeming absurdity, according to many humans, of the mere notion of nonhuman animals having equal worth relative to human animals. One must bear in mind, though, that some humans continue to ridicule the notion that all humans have equal value and worth, despite strides in human rights movements. One of the parallels in human and nonhuman animal rights movements is the involvement of the relatively more powerful acting to alleviate the oppression of the less powerful. As expected, social and economic power are helpful to implementing rights movements, human and nonhuman.

### INTRODUCTION

You and I are animals, human animals. And then there are nonhuman animals, the non-speciesist term applied to animals who are not human (Beirne 1995). While sociologists have long studied oppression by humans against other humans, we have not considered the similarities between human oppression and nonhuman oppression. Oppression is not equally distributed among humans, nor is it among nonhuman animals. All nonhuman animals are oppressable by humans, some more so than others. With humans and nonhumans, the degree of oppression is often a matter of luck (the family one is born into, living free-roaming versus confined) and a matter of belonging to a particular class (race, socioeconomic status, gender, or species).

In this analysis, I examine the nature of nonhuman animal oppression, human views on animal inequality, similarities in the oppression of human minorities and nonhuman animals, and the evolution of human and nonhuman animal rights.

### THE NATURE OF ANIMAL OPPRESSION

Humans inflict pain, humiliation, and death upon nonhuman animals. We hunt, farm, slaughter, and eat them. We trap them, brand them, and test products on them. We sell them as animal companions (pets), breeders, and workers.<sup>1</sup> Movie companies rent them as actors. Nonhuman animals are forced to perform in races, rodeos, and circuses. They entertain us as contenders in bull, cock, and dog fights.

While some humans are relatively free from oppression (in the United States, moneyed white males), all classifications of nonhuman

animals are susceptible to oppression. Nonhuman animals may be temporarily and relatively unoppressed as when they are free to roam in the "wild" or when they have equality-minded human companions to protect them. But this freedom is precarious and highly conditional. Free-roaming animals can be trapped and hunted. Their life chances are diminished when any human encroachment occurs, when environmental de-stabilization occurs, when corporate ownership takes over wildlife refuges and national parks. As companions to humans, nonhuman animals are relatively unoppressed as long as their humans are enabled and agree to this protective arrangement.

For the most part, nonhuman animals are not considered to be worth as much as humans. For example, humans do things to nonhuman animals that they would not do to humans. With rare exception, humans do not wear human skin or eat human flesh. Yet we do wear animal skins and furs and we do eat nonhuman animals. I would expect that most humans do not think about the rightness or wrongness of behaviors such as these or others involving exploitation, neglect, and pain. Many of us who are perfectly nice people do not recognize that we engage in oppressive behaviors toward nonhuman animals and would prefer not to know about it. Humans are often surprised when other humans bring to their attention that nonhuman animals are poorly treated in any number of circumstances and that nonhuman animals have similar feelings that they, humans, have. For those humans who do think about it at all, casual conversation suggests that many of us conclude that nonhuman animals do not feel pain, stress,

loneliness, and degradation like humans do. Moreover, many humans may assume that their desires and needs for furs, animal-tested products, and so on, make the nonhuman animal's sacrifice appropriate.

The very idea of equalizing humans with nonhumans probably seems abstract, dismissable, and even ridiculous to most humans. Humans have not always had and many still do not have a generous view of other humans either. It has not always been the case and still is not globally true that humans believe in the equality of humankind. To this day, many humans retain the belief that certain categories of humans (women, African Americans, and others) do not deserve equal and fair treatment because these oppressed peoples are insensitive to oppressive conditions or are unworthy of nonoppressive conditions.

Because we do not think of nonhuman animals as having rights, value, and feelings, it does not enter all humans' consciousness to consider our own and others' treatment of nonhuman animals. With this in mind, consider that human societies not only impose hierarchies on humans but that humans also place nonhuman species hierarchically.

#### **OF THE OPPRESSED, WHO SHALL BE THE MOST OPPRESSED?**

##### **Moral Crusades Against Minorities in the Animal (Queen)dom**

A colleague recently told me that humans in Australia determine which nonhuman animals to kill in order to protect other, endangered nonhuman animals (Milovanovic 1995). In the United States, we sometimes do the reverse: We kill endangered species to protect other species. Robbins (1995) reports that Montana ranchers kill one species recovering from endangerment (wolves) in order to protect their cattle and their animal companions (dogs). In either case, humans decide which nonhuman animals are worthy to live.

Prejudice is an ugly attitude applied to any species. From the human perspective, some categories of nonhuman animals may be particularly disrespected; such as bats, rats, parana, spiders, snakes, and wolves. Tuttle (1995) describes the "age-old prejudice against bats" and how it has encouraged humans to destroy bats in large numbers with such unnecessarily cruel methods as igniting a stream of hairspray to burn the bats alive. Wolves, long considered a scourge, were

virtually wiped out by ranchers and Federal trappers, who poison the wolves, trap them, and throw dynamite into dens of wolf pups (Robbins 1995).

Prejudice against particular species is partly due to irrational messages passed along through socialization. We hear from our siblings and peers that "bats just give me the creeps," "snakes give me the willies," and "cats are sneaky." We watch movies depicting Doberman pinschers and arachnids as murderers. In addition to peer socialization and movies, prejudice can be due to historical and present-day accounts of the dangers posed by nonhuman animals. Superficially, these accounts make the prejudice seem reasonable. For example, rats carried the fleas that carried the plague, bats transmit rabies, spiders and snakes are stealthy and can be deadly, and cougars kill human-owned sheep. Whatever the source of prejudice, there are some categories of animals for whom a special insensitivity is reserved. These are the minorities of the nonhuman animal culture and may be subject to extra-oppression.

We know from sociological studies that devalued humans are targeted for moral crusades and panics, about which I will say more in a moment. I am suggesting that crusades and panics are also leveled at particular species of nonhuman animals, especially those who are attributed with human traits. That is, some nonhuman animals are considered to be particularly bad and in need of punishment because they exhibit human traits and behaviors: bad intentions, premeditation, social organization, maternal instincts, lewd and lascivious behavior, etc.

Protective mothering, a positive behavior among humans, can be turned against nonhuman animals. A *New York Times* (1995) article describes a female moose, who attacked two people while trying to protect her calf, as a "killer moose." Witnesses on the University of Alaska campus said both attacks were due to students throwing snowballs and harassing the moose and her calf for hours. Wildlife officials killed her because of "evidence of ill disposition."

Describing wolves' predatory behavior, a rancher said they are "like a football team. They practice a lot and have a game plan" (Robbins 1995). Since wolves are perceived as organized and intentional killers, public hysteria is justified when wolves kill a human's pet. Public hysteria "is a pretty common thing

with wolves .... Dogs get run over all the time, but a wolf kills one and there's an outcry" according to the head of wolf recovery for the Fish and Wildlife Service in Montana (Robbins 1995). Pacelle (1996) finds the same unreasonable panic reaction to the acts of one mountain lion, considered the "lord of stealthy murder," and suggests that rare incidents "should not license us to wreak vengeance on others bothering no one".

As for humans, moral crusades target the socially disadvantaged as though they are dangerous, unworthy of just treatment, and appropriate for extra social control. The reader can do doubt come up with a number of instances of crusades against specific categories of humans but I will offer several examples. Specified categories of humans have been and are, in the name of ethnic cleansing, exterminated: Jews during the Holocaust and Bosnian Muslims presently. Some have argued that the U.S. criminal justice system's targeting of economically-disadvantaged African American males amounts to genocide (Johnson, Leighton 1995). Drug wars in the United States have traditionally targeted racial minorities (Reinerman 1994). The poor have routinely been arrested, convicted, incarcerated, executed more than the nonpoor regardless of their relative crime rates (Reiman 1995). Crusades against the poor have led to overall worsened life chances: absent health care, poor education, & poor opportunities. Women have not fared well economically or in terms of personal safety. Regarding the latter, in some cultures they remain defenseless against rape, assaults, murder, genital mutilations, and the like. People of nonheterosexual orientation have been subject to movements prohibiting their employment, marriage, and parenthood. Less formally, gays and lesbians have been beaten and murdered. The differently-abled have been denied housing and job opportunities and have been subject to violence. In sum, specifically-targeted humans and non-humans are denied health, freedom, and safety.

### **A Comparison of Human and Nonhuman Oppression**

The following is a nonexhaustive list of more specific overlaps in perception and treatment of oppressed humans and nonhuman animals. Here we can see more clearly the myths, prejudices, and unequal treatment directed at nonhuman animals and disenfranchised humans.

Women are commonly attributed with nonhuman animal traits, as pets to be pampered and protected or as valueless beings to be used and mistreated. Women are given animals names such as foxes, pussies, chicks, and bitches. A sexually attractive woman may land a job as a Playboy bunny. African Americans are also called nonhuman animal names, such as coons, porch monkeys, and jungle bunnies. Categories of racist Asians, for instance Japanese, level charges of being less-evolved, of being primates, at other Asians, for instance Koreans. Native Americans have been described historically by white people as wild beasts:

... as a hairy, naked, club-wielding child of nature who existed halfway between humanity and animality ... [living] a life of bestial self-fulfillment, directed by instinct... (Berkhofer 1978)

Even white male humans are called animal names, such as stud, which is an objectifying term, or pig, which is by no means complimentary of the pig or the man.

Carol Adams (1992) offers an interesting perspective on the naming process. She wonders, if women or any humans are placed on the same plane as nonhumans, is that bad? Why should humans be insulted to be called a nonhuman animal? By asking this question, she drives home the point that humans are insulted to be called nonhumans, which is another way of saying that humans believe they are superior to nonhuman animals. Neubeck (1991) also notes the nonhuman names applied to women and remarks that "... men place women metaphorically on the level of animals" as a way of establishing their superiority over them.

Women and nonhuman animals can be "trophies." People possess stuffed carcasses of animals "bagged" in a hunt, live thoroughbreds, and live beautiful women ("trophy wives"). The trophy concept is closely related to the ownership concept: To own such a trophy presumably reflects well on the owner.

Nonhuman animals and women are seductresses who get what they deserve. Once upon a time in U.S. and European history, non-human animals who were raped by humans were executed. The human rapist received a lesser punishment because the nonhuman animal perpetrated the rape by being seductive (Friedman 1993). Women as rape victims are often blamed for the rape. As is true for

women and racial minorities, nonhuman animals can be sexually objectified.

Nonhuman animals can be abused as a substitute for women and as a warning to women. A woman's animal companion may be hurt and murdered by the woman's human partner as a way of controlling her (Browne 1987; Renzetti 1992). In defense of the "bunny bop" in which rabbits are killed by clubs, feet, stones, etc., an organizer of the North Carolina American Legion which sponsors the activity justifies the animal abuse thus: The men involved would be beating their wives if they were not "letting off steam" by killing rabbits (Adams 1992). This kind of behavior, along with pet abuse and pet murder, serves to threaten women vis-a-vis harm to nonhuman animals.

Nonhuman animals are assumed to not feel pain the way that humans do. It was once thought that African-American slaves did not feel pain and could withstand greater degrees of physical abuse than could (or should) whites. Indeed, African-American slaves were considered only partially, three-fifths, human (Jackson 1987).

Nonhuman animals have less worth than humans and, in many cultures, nonwhite humans have less worth than white Aryan humans. In addition to the examples above, Jews were beaten, branded, enslaved, experimented upon, and gassed by the millions during the Holocaust. Nonhuman animals are beaten, branded, enslaved, experimented upon, and gassed by the millions on ranches and farms, in laboratories, and in humane societies.

Like nonhuman animals, human minorities, probably more than nonminorities, provide sports entertainment. The *New York Times* (1997) reports on the popularity of human males, with names like "the Beast" and "the Pit Bull," beating each other bloody in boxing events that are "likened to human cock-fighting". Similarly, writing of a boxing match between two African-American fighters, Hunter S. Thompson (1979) describes

...the sickening thumps and cracks and groans of two desperate, adrenaline-crazed giants who are whipping and pounding each other like two pit bulls in a death battle...

Minority athletes, lured by big money, fame, and an avenue out of urban ghettos, are often exploited. Nonhuman animals have less of a choice in their roles as sports entertainers.

Nonhuman animals have no rights. In the United States, women, African-Americans, and the propertyless have been denied voting rights and are still denied many rights, including the right to equal pay.

According to the Thirteenth Amendment of the United States Constitution, convicted felons are "slaves of the state" and as such are denied more civil rights than probably any other category of human animal. Criminals, especially those accused of heinous crimes, are referred to as animals, brutes, and beasts. As with nonhuman animals, we have performed medical experiments upon them, tested cosmetics and drugs on them, caged them, and taken their lives. True, they have engaged in illegal conduct and are imprisoned as a result. Regardless of the circumstances and reasons, humans in prison are treated as non-humans, in a way that humans might think appropriate for "animals."

In discussions of preferred forms of human execution, lethal injection is presented as the superior method. It is said to be a quick, painless, efficient, and antiseptic way to end human lives (Trombley 1992). In a National Public Radio (1994) interview, a former attorney general is quoted as saying that lethal injection is "not a lot different from putting a dog to sleep." We can not be sure that nonhuman and human animals do not feel pain during execution. Moreover, it is interesting to note that when the state devalues a human life to the point that the state is willing to end it, human criminal offenders are likened to non-human animals who are "put to sleep."

Hapless as criminal offenders are, non-human animals have no legal defenses without the aid of humans. As with humans, they can be imprisoned, beaten, and executed. They cannot plead self-defense, incompetence, duress, hardship; they cannot plead at all. Humans sometimes plead on their behalf.

## EVOLUTION IN HUMAN, INHUMAN, AND INHUMANE HISTORY

As suggested, powerful humans determine who is eligible for fair and equal treatment. Throughout human history, there have been and remain prejudices against oppressed people regarding their mental and physical capabilities, their feelings, their worth, and their utility or disutility to less oppressed people. Over time and in some cultures, oppressed humans have gained some basic rights, at least symbolically through laws. Granting

women the right to vote, the right to reproductive choices, and the right to equal pay have occurred in living memory. U.S. citizens can no longer be legally denied a job on the basis of race, gender, religion, abledness, and age. Equally importantly, a rhetoric has developed in some cultures that all humans deserve equal treatment.<sup>2</sup>

There is reason for optimism regarding nonhuman rights because there is some, albeit limited, evidence of lessening oppression of humans toward nonhuman animals. Boycotts of animal-tested products have successfully halted much animal testing. Laws have proscribed cruelty to nonhuman animals and enhanced the penalties for animal abusers. There are more offerings of vegetarian food in restaurants and the fur industry lost \$12 million in fiscal year 1995 (*PETA Animal Times* 1995). Attendance at greyhound races has decreased 27 percent between 1990 and 1994 (*HSUS News* 1996). People in general have become sensitized and are paying more attention to nonhuman animal equality.

There is a parallel phenomenon in human and nonhuman rights movements: Relatively powerful humans are a noteworthy force in reducing the oppression of less powerful humans and nonhumans. In the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, whites were much involved in ending desegregation and ensuring voting rights. In the women's suffrage movement, well-to-do, educated women and men provided the money, negotiation skills, and entree that gained women the right to vote. The same would be true of straights' involvement in gay and lesbian rights movements, the nonpoor championing the rights of the poor, and so on. It is hard to say whether those with greater social and economic power were necessary or just helpful to the cause of human rights. United farm workers come to mind as a human rights organization that is more grass-roots in its composition. However, the participation of the relatively powerful can not be denied, and their resources improve the chances of successfully-met demands.

As we have seen, the social perceptions and mistreatment of nonhuman animals and certain categories of humans are remarkably alike. While it does not seem to be the case that the oppressed necessarily support each other in their movements toward equality (witness the Million Man March), there has been at least one simultaneous rights movement for the oppressed: the women's suffrage and animal

rights movements.<sup>3</sup> Carol Adams (1992) offers a detailed description of the sympathetic relationship between many women and nonhuman animals and reminds us that women have been at the forefront of vegetarian movements.

Nonhuman animals are entirely dependent upon humans to defend them. Animal rights advocates are to the animal rights movement more than what human rights workers have been to human rights movements. Nonhuman animal rights can only come about from human efforts.

## CONCLUSION

Let me conclude with a quizzical story on the evolution of human perceptions about and behavior toward nonhuman animals. The *National Geographic* (1995) reported a gorilla being freed from duty as a "mall gorilla". Ivan, the gorilla, was captured as an infant in 1964 from the Congo and taken to the United States by a wildlife trader who sold him to a man who built a shopping mall in Tacoma, Washington.<sup>4</sup> Ivan was on display for nearly 30 years in a small, bare, very grim cell. He had never seen another gorilla for most of his life. Ivan now has a home in Seattle's Woodland Park Zoo when he is not on loan to Atlanta's Zoo. His improved state, living in a zoo, albeit loaned by humans to humans, is a testimony to the evolving willingness of humans to grant equality to nonhuman animals.

## ENDNOTES

1. Buying and selling nonhuman animals, for example in pet stores, is a remarkable concept given the notion of human animals buying nonhuman animals, one type of animal purchasing and owning another. In the United States, we have outlawed this practice as applied to humans.
2. I will not go into cross-cultural comparisons of nonhuman animal oppression in this analysis. It is known from animal rights literature that all cultures engage in nonhuman animal oppression and that some cultures appear to be worse than others in this regard; for example, Taiwan and China compared to the Netherlands and Germany.
3. Among the controversies over the Million Man March of October 16, 1995 was that, while a show of unity among African American people is a good idea, the march's exclusion of women, Jews, homosexuals, and others was a lousy idea in terms of equalizing social and economic power for all.
4. Purchases such as these were legal until 1973, before the Endangered Species Act.

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