

Animal Welfare Versus Animal Rights

A reply to Matthew Scully

BY WESLEY J. SMITH

ANIMAL RIGHTS began as an issue, became a movement, and has morphed into an ideology. Usually, animal rights is allied with the Left; but not always. Thus, when I decided to write a book criticizing the animal-rights movement, I expected to be attacked as being somehow indifferent to the suffering of animals and, moreover, that Matthew Scully—the animal-rights movement’s favorite conservative—would lead the charge. What I didn’t expect was for Scully to illustrate my supposed heartlessness with a false anecdote, the by-product of his own furious imagination. And to that, I strenuously object.

In criticizing my explanation of the need for using animals in scientific research, Scully accused me of offering “soothing descriptions of violent experiments (chimps are ‘seated quietly, not struggling’ as their limbs are about to be broken.)” False. I never wrote about a chimp experiment that involved breaking limbs. Indeed, *I have never heard* of such an experiment. Scully can rail all he wants against my book. But he has no right to resort to cheap demagoguery to score an easy emotional point.

Scully also contended that I consider “animal protection” to be “something strange and pernicious,” a “radical agenda”—and that I don’t object to animals’ suffering “torment.” Of course, that isn’t true. My criticisms are directed not against protecting animals, but against giving them “rights”—a distinction with a crucial difference.

But let us ponder: What would drive a deeply talented writer like Scully to engage in such blatant falsehood? Like Zeus throwing his destructive lightning bolts, radical animal advocates often deploy the rant in order to drive rationality and reason off the field. In the face of such fury, we are tempted to cower under our desks, thereby allowing animal-rights activists to stand alone as righteous “defenders” of those who “can’t speak for themselves.”

That may be an effective advocacy tactic, but in the end, it doesn’t help animals. For example, Scully scathingly castigated my support of elephant culling in Africa’s wild-animal parks. Perhaps because it would interfere with a good diatribe, he notably failed to tell readers *why* I took that position.

Managing elephant populations is essential to maintaining a proper ecological balance for the benefit of all park animals. Indeed, if elephants were allowed to overpopulate, they would wreak havoc on park habitat, leading to an eventual loss of forage and possibly their own starvation. Moreover—since much of sub-Saharan Africa is destitute—without the bounteous funds raised through charging sport hunters tens of thousands of dollars for each elephant or other wild animal taken in the parks, these magnificent

preserves probably couldn’t exist. But such important moral and environmental considerations are lost when the entire discussion is reduced to wailing about the culling of elephant herds.

Scully’s entire review was similarly overwrought and uninformative. For example, he chided me for worrying that “accepting the premises of animal causes” would “humble—nay degrade—the human self-image.” But what were those causes? He doesn’t say. Allow me: I opposed elevating animals to legal personhood and granting them the right to sue.

So what’s the book really about? With *A Rat Is a Pig Is a Dog Is a Boy*, I hope to clear up the confusion in the public mind between promoting “animal welfare”—a noble cause, which I endorse—and “animal rights,” which I oppose. The former acknowledges the ethical propriety of using animals for human benefit, while vigorously insisting on concomitant duties to treat animals humanely. In direct contrast, animal-rights ideology disdains the welfarist approach as “speciesism”—i.e., “discrimination” against animals—and dogmatically insists we have no right to consume meat, to wear leather, to conduct animal research, and, for some, even to own dogs. In other words, the ultimate goal of animal rights—which believers understand to be a multi-generational project—is ending all animal domestication no matter how beneficial to humans.

Thus, rather than a movement dedicated merely to being nicer to animals, as many suppose, animal rights is actually a subversive *ideology*—for some, a quasi-religion—that establishes both express and implied equivalences between the moral value of human beings and that of animals. Indeed, I took the title of my book from a famous statement by Ingrid Newkirk, leader of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), who told *Vogue* back in 1989, “Animal Liberationists do not separate out the human animal, so there is no rational basis for saying that a human being has special rights. A rat is a pig is a dog is a boy. They are all mammals.”

If being human is irrelevant, as animal rightists contend, upon what attribute do rightists believe that moral value should be assigned? The movement is not monolithic in answering this question. Some, like Rutgers law professor Gary Francione, contend that “sentience” brings with it a “right” not to be property. Others, like Peter Singer—not a pure animal rightist—assert that moral value should be based on an individual’s possessing sufficient cognitive capacities to be considered a “person,” a status enjoyed by some animals in his view, but not by some people: the comatose elderly, for example, or newborn infants. Perhaps the most common approach to endowing equivalent moral value between humans and animals is the capacity to suffer. Animal-rights philosopher Richard Ryder, who coined the term speciesism, also coined the word “painience,” and describes it as the “only convincing basis for attributing rights or, indeed, interests to others.”

Regardless of the approach, to the animal-rights true believer, that which is done to an animal is judged as if the same action were done to a human being. Hence, many animal rightists believe cattle ranching is as odious as slavery and research on lab rats an equivalent evil to Mengele’s experiments in the camps.

PETA explicitly pitched that nihilistic message for two years in its infamous pro-vegetarian Holocaust on Your Plate campaign. Holocaust on Your Plate juxtaposed historic photographs of the Shoah to depictions of animals, for example deceased, emaciated inmates presented adjacent to a photo of dead pigs. The text stated in part: “Like the Jews murdered in concentration camps, animals are terrorized when they are housed in huge filthy warehouses and rounded up for shipment to slaughter. The leather sofa

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and handbag are the moral equivalent of the lampshades made from the skins of people killed in the death camps.”

Such bizarre moral equivalency is embraced fervently and literally by many animal rightists—again, as distinguished from animal-welfare supporters—and generates intense and angry emotions. In their zeal, some turn to violence and terrorism as part of loose-knit cells of such organizations as the Animal Liberation Front (ALF) and Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty. Too many animal-rights leaders—Gary Francione and Wayne Pacelle, head of the Humane Society of the United States, are notable exceptions—scandalously refuse to condemn this criminality. For example, PETA, on its website, compares ALF to the French Resistance and the Underground Railroad. This is odd for a supposedly peaceable movement, considering that “direct actions” have included death threats, bombings of researchers’ homes and cars, arson, burglary, and identity theft.

The hyperemotionality of animal-rights campaigners too often hides the tremendous benefits we receive from the proper and humane use of animals. For this reason, I devote an entire section of the book to a judicious discussion of animal research, the use of animals as food, and the more volatile issues of fur and hunting.

I don’t pretend to identify proper husbandry techniques in every case. But I believe it is important both to expose the false assertions made by animal rightists—for example, that humans do not benefit from animal research and that fur trappers still use archaic metal traps that break animals’ legs—and to allow people engaged in these industries a forum to express their usually drowned-out perspectives. Thus, I spend several chapters describing why animals are properly part of an integrated scientific approach that also includes non-animal techniques, such as computer models, human cell lines, and, later, human-subject testing. I explain and *support* the “Three R’s”—refinement, reduction, and replacement—a concerted effort within the life sciences to reduce the number of animals used in experimentation.

But at some point, new drugs and medical techniques must be tested on living organisms. For example, animal testing showed that an experimental AIDS treatment caused devastating liver damage. The medical company went back to the drawing board, fixed the problem, and retested the new drugs, this time without adverse effect on animals. Clearing that important hurdle opened the door to human trials, culminating several years later in a now widely available drug that has alleviated immeasurable levels of human suffering. Had the animal testing been skipped—as animal liberationists demand—human patients might have been killed by the first drug, setting back the entire field for many years. Indeed, without animal testing, the treatment would probably never have been developed, as a consequence of which, many AIDS patients who are thriving today would instead be in their graves.

The ideal I wish to advance—indeed, to conserve—is “human exceptionalism,” that is, the unique moral status of human life. It is remarkable that our exceptional natures require defense. After all, what other species in the known history of life has attained the wondrous capacities of human beings? What other species has transcended the tooth-and-claw world of naked natural selection to the point that, at least to some degree, we now control nature instead of being controlled by it? What other species builds civilizations, records history, creates art, makes music, thinks abstractly, envisions and fabricates machinery, improves life through science and engineering, or explores the deeper truths found in philosophy and religion? What other species rescues

injured animals instead of ignoring or eating them? What other species has true freedom? Perhaps most crucially, what other species can be held to moral account?

Human exceptionalism increasingly is criticized as arrogant and hubristic, spurring us to mistreat animals and despoil the planet. I believe the contrary is true. Indeed, if being human isn’t what gives us the duty to treat animals properly, what in the world does?

I conclude my book responding to the charge that animal domestication is an evil:

Human slavery was (and is) pure evil. Keeping elephants and zebras in properly designed and maintained zoos and animal parks is not. The Rwandan and Cambodian genocides were acts of pure evil. Humanely slaughtering millions of animals to provide the multitudes with nourishing and good-tasting food and durable clothing is not. Mengele’s lethal experimentation on identical twins at Auschwitz was truly heinous. Testing new drugs or surgical procedures on animals to save children’s lives and improve human (and animal) thriving is both morally beneficent and ethically justified.

As *Washington Post* writer Michael Gerson once put it, “I remain convinced that equating animal rights and human rights does nothing to serve either cause.” I don’t see any other way to look at it. Properly directed, our love for animals is a healthy expression of empathy, as well as a potent measure of our success as a society. But this devotion must not include viewing animals as if they were people. After years of research into this field, I am convinced that if we ever come to think of ourselves as merely another animal in the forest, that is precisely how we will act.

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