

Some Thoughts on Humanism, Animal Welfare and Animal Rights

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

Humanists have long been accused of being speciesist, or biased toward human beings at the expense of other species. Many humanists readily admit to being speciesist. Others deny it, and still others clearly are not speciesist. They are vegans or vegetarians and consistently speak, write and work for animal rights.

Animal rights are not to be confused with animal welfare. Animal welfare concerns looking out for pets and farm animals, finding homes for pets, seeing to it that they receive veterinarian care, seeing to it that they are spayed and neutered, etc. Animal rights activists, however, insist that other animals have certain rights, such as the right to roam freely, the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, the right to be free from medical or scientific experimentation, etc.

As zoologists have pointed out, freedom in the human democratic sense does not necessarily apply to animals. Too often, well-intentioned human beings impose their ideas upon other animals. However, zoologists have noted that animals in zoos generally live longer than those in the wild. They receive regular veterinary care. They mate more often. They are free from predators, they are better fed, etc.

Returning to the question of speciesism, the term humanism itself seems to imply speciesism. Humanism is human-centered thought and action. The Christian debater William Lane Craig routinely claims that humanism is speciesist. However, this charge only reminds those in the know that *Christianity* is speciesist. Indeed, the First (Old) Testament commands “man” to subdue the Earth. Animals were routinely sacrificed by the Hebrews in biblical times. The Hebrews often slaughtered the animals of their enemies. Jesus drowned pigs to prove a point. Moreover, there is not a single word in the Bible in defense of animal welfare, let alone animal rights.

Some people compare speciesism to racism. However, is this a good analogy? After all, racism is about how human beings treat one another, not how human beings treat animals from other species. We recognize human rights. What rights do other animals have?

Should we view the lives of other animals on par with the lives of humans? If so, that would mean that those convicted of brutally killing dogs should face life imprisonment or the death penalty. (Indeed, many animal lovers seemed to want just such a sentence for NFL quarterback Michael Vick after his conviction for dog fighting and animal cruelty.) Or for those that are particularly liberal, it could mean that those convicted of first degree murder should only receive a prison sentence of a couple years at the most, similar to a sentence for a particularly brutal dog killer.

Do all animals have rights? What about disease-carrying vermin? Should humans be arrested and prosecuted for killing insects and pests that invade their homes or destroy their crops? Should they be permitted by law to kill fleas that infest their pets? Should they be permitted to keep cats for the sole purpose of killing mice and rats on their property? Should we be allowed to kill parasites in our bodies? Or would all of these examples be cases of self-defense?

Some animal rights activists have insisted that, were they faced with the dilemma of saving their beloved pet or a child they did not know from a burning building, they would choose their pet in a heartbeat. They reason that the life of a human being is no more important than the life of an animal from another species.

In this extreme case, most people are clearly speciesist, and it is highly unlikely that this will ever change. Most human beings will likely continue to value members of their own species over animals from other species. All of the brilliant arguments that animal rights activists can muster are simply unlikely to change this.

Human beings use bomb-sniffing dogs and canaries to test for dangerous conditions in mines. Some animal rights activists argue that this is unfair, that human beings should volunteer to risk their lives in such cases. Similarly, human beings use animals for testing drugs, etc. Some animal rights activists argue that such testing is unnecessary. However, many scientists claim that there is no way to simulate the cell, and that animal experimentation is necessary. Would it be better to simply have human volunteers risk their lives for medical research? Most humanists - and most humans - would consider this to be inhumane. (However, is it really necessary to experiment with animals for the production of perfume, makeup, etc.? These are hardly human necessities.)

Still, that does not change the fact that human beings should have sympathy for other animals and much responsibility for them. Human beings are destroying environments where other animals used to live. When these animals go to the cities in efforts to survive, many human beings want to kill them.

Animals are used in circuses. Animal rights activists claim that the animals are abused, but animal handlers in circuses argue otherwise. The fact, though, is that circuses can provide great profitable family entertainment *without* animal acts.

It is outrageous that many people still hunt animals for sport. There are too many other sports to be enjoyed in which athletes can freely choose to engage. Of course, many hunters claim that they are reducing the numbers of certain animals and in the process reducing starvation, etc. However, this sounds like a rationalization. They are hardly killing other animals out of the kindness of their hearts.

Ideally, all people would be vegans or vegetarians, and all animals would be herbivores. (That raises the question, why would a perfect God create a world in which life feeds upon itself?) However, such is not the case. This raises another question. Where do poor people fit into this discussion? Most hungry people could not care less about animal rights. They are interested in eating whatever is available. Indeed, some years ago, hungry people in Rwanda were killing gorillas to eat. They understandably were not concerned about protecting an endangered species. They saw *themselves* as being in danger of starving to death. Until the hungry masses have enough to eat, vegans and vegetarians will continue to be a tiny minority. Moreover, such lifestyles will continue to appeal primarily to middle-class and upper-class people in wealthy nations.

Ninety-nine percent of all of the species that have ever lived have gone extinct. Human beings clearly are not the only species wiping out other species. Cats threaten bird species, snakes threaten various species in Florida, etc. However, human beings can continue to save species and provide

animal welfare for certain species. This is humanistic. Most humanists - like most human beings - are speciesist in that we are more concerned with the welfare of our fellow human beings than even our dearly beloved pets. Yet this should not prevent us from saving the environments of other species and helping them to survive and thrive. We must continue to oppose puppy mills, denounce torturous living conditions for farm animals, etc. Indeed, this could be one of the greatest legacies that human beings leave to the world. However, it is highly unlikely that human beings will place the same value on the lives of other animals as they place upon human beings - at least in the near future.