

HUMANISING ANIMALS - CIVILISING PEOPLE

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Nearly a quarter of a century after Tom Regan's important work, *The Case for Animal Rights* little has been done to reduce the suffering experienced by many animals in Australia. In fact, the situation has become demonstrably worse for many farm animals.

Regan's book didn't produce wide-ranging behavioural change because the timing was wrong. Most people are only concerned with matters that directly impact on them. And compassion, like financial resources, is finite. These are the two main causes of preventable suffering. Hence, despite the knock-down arguments that have been advanced by a number of leading thinkers over the centuries for treating animals less cruelly, the plight of animals has not improved.

But the animal welfare movement is now starting to resonate favourably with the masses. This is not because of a sudden cognitive awakening in community brought about by literary triumphs which inform us that animal cruelty is undesirable.

Rather, it is because of the lack of other obvious causes towards which people can direct their, albeit limited, compassion and moral concern. Most people in opulent western nations such as Australia are for the first time in human history underwhelmed by the effort required to overcome the challenges of leading a comfortable life.

Most resources that we require to lead a flourishing and stimulating existence are readily available. Ironically, in some cases we have been so successful in producing what we need that our successes have become our excesses.

It's predicted that by the end of the next decade our growing waistlines will be the nation's number one health problem. As a species you know you're flying high when the biggest threat to your health comes from informed over-indulgence.

Food production is not the only excess that we're choking on. We've got more human rights than we know what to do with. The right to life, liberty, property, equal access to high quality health care, education and the professions are all entrenched aspects of the Australian landscape. When it comes to pursuing social justice causes of the human kind, the remaining options are unlikely to evoke a meaningful sense of benevolence and attainment.

The heavy social justice causes of days gone by make the current reformist agenda seem embarrassingly trivial. Agitating against job-creating industrial relations laws, battling the Smart card, promoting anti-Americanism and salvaging the reputation of convicted terrorists will do nothing to make the world a better place.

Now that most human injustices have been corrected, the compassion reserves of many Australians are overflowing. That's why taste and nutrition no longer exhaust the considerations which inform many of our food choices.

This is not to underrate the importance of the many fine literary works that have been written which seek to give animal welfare issues greater weight in the community psyche. Regan's classic and Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* highlighted the extent of animal suffering to millions of animal welfare novices. While these books were regarded as pioneering works at the time, the most eloquent and forceful argument for conferring greater concern to animals was expressed two hundred years ago:

The day may come when the rest of the animal creation may acquire those rights which never could have been withholden from them but by the hand of tyranny. The French have already discovered that the blackness of the skin is no reason why a human being should be abandoned without redress to the caprice of a

tormentor. It may one day come to be recognized the number of legs, the villosity of the skin, or the termination of the os sacrum are reasons equally insufficient for abandoning a sensitive being to the same fate. What else is it that that should trace the insuperable line? Is it the faculty of reason, or perhaps the faculty of discourse? But a full-grown horse or dog is beyond comparison a more rational, as well as more conversable animal, than an infant of a day or a week or even a month, old. But suppose they were otherwise, what would it avail? The question is not, Can they reason? nor Can they talk? but Can they suffer?.

With these words, Jeremy Bentham nails why mistreating animals diminishes people. While animals can't speak in ways that we understand and their intellect is lacking, they are entitled to be treated with concern because they possess the most important attribute that qualifies an entity for moral standing: the capacity to feel pain.

The only commonality shared by humans, who command our concern and respect, is that they can hurt. The capacity to sense pain gives humans, no matter how marginalised, pitifully deranged or behaviourally maladaptive, moral status. Animals command our moral standing for exactly the same reason.

The inability of animals to use words to communicate their suffering is no excuse for ignoring their suffering. To the contrary, this places a higher burden on supposedly morally enlightened communities to detect their screams and redress them.

Paradoxically, rights discourse, which represents the current moral orthodoxy in western nations both undercuts and advances the animal welfare movement.

The moral standing of animals is most evident against the backdrop of a utilitarian moral theory, which contends that the ultimate aim of morality is to maximise happiness and minimise pain. Animals hurt in the same way as humans. There are not different types of suffering, only different degrees and intensities. Hence animals get full moral standing in

a utilitarian ethic. However, utilitarianism is no longer the main driver of moral and political thought.

Following the Second World War, rights based moral theories have replaced utilitarianism as the moral orthodoxy in western cultures as a result of the perceived need to make the individual (as opposed to the common good) the central moral currency. The growing popularity of rights theories stems from the (flawed) perception that rights best give individuals a sphere of protection, which can be used as a shield against the sometimes unreasonable demands of the many. While rights theories are meant to produce better living conditions for people, ostensibly they do little to promote the interests of animals. Such theories are increasingly advanced in terms of 'human rights', thereby potentially wiping animals from our sphere of moral concern.

Yet, in opulent countries like Australia, rights based moral theories are now working in favour of animals. Rights by their nature are individualising notions. Ideologies based on rights invariably limit the moral horizon to oneself and those who are directly and immediately affected by our actions. Accordingly, as a community we pay scant regard in our moral prioritization process to the interests of humans in distant parts of the world.

Approximately 30,000 people die daily of hunger and other readily preventable causes. Australia's response to this is inadequate. We contribute less than 50 cents out of every \$100 to developing nations. This is well below the modest international benchmark of 70 cents.

The distance between rights obsessed Australians and the misery being experienced by destitute Africans militates heavily against us paying more than lip service to their suffering anytime in the foreseeable future.

Animals are the main beneficiaries of our inability to extend our moral radar beyond Australia's territorial waters. The pitiable existence of many animals provides Australians with a concrete and proximate cause to channel their compassion.

The focus on animal welfare issues has been greatly accelerated by a number of increasingly sophisticated, commercially savvy organisations such as *Voicelless* and *Animals Australia*.

The organisations have dropped the hyperbole and extremism which was symptomatic of animal welfare movements in the past. They are measured in their approach and are focused on connecting with mainstream Australians and are even becoming an entrenched feature of the top end of town. Animal welfare groups now positively seek out audiences with corporate heavyweights and engage them in their own terminology; framing their submissions in terms of Australian jobs and market imperatives.

The maturity and increased effectiveness of the new breed of animal welfare groups is marked by one central tenet. Public opinion and behaviour cannot be shaped by jarring people into action, even with factually sound information. People will only follow if you find common ground with them and then set out the path for them.

That pain is bad is the common ground that the animal welfare movement has with almost every member of the community. Against this bedrock of shared concern, the movement is getting people to jump onboard its band wagon by providing factual information to the community about the enormity of animal suffering and suggesting ways in which it can be ameliorated without any meaningful inconvenience to people.

The means suggested to improve the lot of animals are measured and realistic and unlikely to jar too many people from the bandwagon. Absent are (the ethically sound but –at this time - pragmatically unrealistic) radical calls to immediately stop eating meat and refrain from using any animal products.

History shows that beings cannot go from negligible to full moral standing in the one hop. This is an incremental process. The first imperative of the animal welfare movement

is to eradicate practices that are intensely cruel to animals, unless this is an overwhelming benefit to be obtained from such conduct.

The current battle lines are drawn around the most egregious and wide ranging forms of animal suffering. This relates to the treatment of farm animals.

Despite significant advances that Australians have enjoyed in individual prosperity over the past fifty years, remarkably we have become more inhumane in the way that we treat many animals.

For most of their lives factory farmed pigs are confined in concrete pens that are so small that they can't turn around; they are denied contact with other pigs and suffer a myriad of painful ailments including lameness and sores through standing on hard floors.

Pigs are social animals and quite smart too – their cognitive skills are equivalent to three year old children. Their confinement results in them experiencing depression and a range of other dysfunctional behavioural traits. The way we treat them is considered so bad that it is outlawed in many parts of the world, including the UK and Sweden.

The pain doesn't end with pigs. Animal welfare laws in Australia don't extend to most of the 500 million production animals in this country. As a result, the level of pain experienced by these animals daily would land people in jail if it was inflicted on pet dogs or cats. Thus, in the wool industry we see that lambs have their tails cut off and males are castrated – anaesthetic is not even an optional extra.

Most battery hens never get the chance to spread their wings – their cages are about the size of an A4 page – and are painfully debeaked, causing such intense shock that it sometimes results in death.

The principal reason that the enormous goodwill in the community towards animals has not translated to less malice towards animals is because most people are unaware of the intolerable conditions in which farm animals are kept.

It is on this front that recent writings are of most utility in improving the conditions of animals. This is the splendour of *Planet Chicken: The Shameful Story of the World's Favourite Bird* by Hattie Ellis, which is in a breezy, yet well researched and informative book which catalogues the grotesque suffering endured by chickens on their cramped path to our dinner plates.

The book also identifies the nutritional and health benefits associated with non-battery chickens and inspires readers to make positive steps to put commercial pressure on industry groups to finally eliminate the gratuitous cruelty experienced by chickens.

The time is right for such cues to finally shape human behaviour. Informing individuals of the suffering that inheres in many of our meals is already driving the operations of some of the biggest global food outlets.

In April this year Burger King announced that it will start using free-range pork and eggs. The fast food giant will ensure that 10 percent of its pork comes from free range suppliers. This will increase to 20 per cent by the end of 2007. At which point, four per cent of its eggs will also come from free range suppliers. Burger King is also pushing for its producers to employ less cruel methods of killing chickens.

It seems that two hundred years after it was incontestably established that animals have moral standing, humans are starting to take seriously this categorical ethical imperative. This is a long overdue but defining step in our voyage to a higher level on the moral mountain. By humanising animals, we will go a long way to civilising people.