



“Animal Rights” vs. Human Rights

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Sometimes sincere people concerned with the protection of innocent human life will express sentiments along these lines:

“Animal rights advocates are eager to protect all kinds of animal life, but seem to ignore the most important animal of all, the *human* animal. They are willing to save the whales, but abort the humans. Protecting animals can never be as important a task as protecting young humans from abortion, embryonic stem cell research or other forms of experimentation.”

Such a viewpoint, though fundamentally correct, should not be taken to signify that animal abuse in our society is an ethical issue that we can forget about. Rather, concern for exercising proper stewardship over animals ought to be a balanced part of a broader concern to avoid exploiting the vulnerable, wherever they are encountered.

Man holds a special place in creation, while remaining an integral part of that creation. Made uniquely in God’s image and likeness, he still belongs to the animal kingdom. Feet on the ground, head looking up to the stars, man exercises a limited dominion over the world and

over the remainder of creation, including the animal kingdom. He perennially faces the question of how to properly exercise that dominion, which is not an absolute right of domination over God’s creation. He is called to reasonably use, rather than abuse, the powers he has received.

To be precise, we should not speak of *animal rights* but of *animal welfare*. Animals do not have rights in the way that humans do. Animal welfare means that we recognize that animals can be used for reasonable purposes, but should not be abused.

I was once invited to participate in a press conference on a particular form of animal abuse. Rows of TV cameras were assembled at City Hall in downtown Chicago to hear a panel of speakers encourage city council members (and the mayor) to uphold a recently-passed ban on serving *foie gras* in Chicago restaurants. The production of *foie gras* involves the repetitive forced tube-feedings of ducks and geese. These animals have a pipe inserted into their throats to pump large quantities of food into their stomachs. This causes their livers to balloon to many times their normal size, so that a delicacy in the form of a creamy patè can

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then be prepared for customers in upscale restaurants. As liver function and other organ systems become compromised, the bloated animals experience considerable suffering. I was asked to give a statement about the ethical concerns raised by the mistreatment and industrialization of these animals.

Cardinal Jozef Ratzinger, who later served as Pope Benedict XVI, once addressed the subject of *foie gras* explicitly during an interview with a journalist:

“We cannot just do whatever we want with them... Certainly, a sort of industrial use of creatures, so that geese are fed in such a way as to produce as large a liver as possible, or hens live so packed together that they become just caricatures of birds, this degrading of living creatures to a commodity seems to me in fact to contradict the relationship of mutuality that comes across in the Bible.”

“Animals too,” he stressed, “are God’s creatures and even if they do not have the same direct relationship to God that man has, they are still creatures of His

will, creatures we must respect as companions in creation.”

When I spoke at the press conference, I mentioned that when I had trained as a research scientist at Yale, I often had to deal with questions about the use of animals in laboratory settings. I pointed out that while animals may be sacrificed or used humanely for legitimate purposes, such as obtaining food and clothing, or advancing serious scientific research, the use of animals to produce *foie gras* is clearly in another category altogether. It is neither a humane nor a reasonable use of animals.

The production of *foie gras* is instead oriented toward the satisfaction of a disordered desire, a disturbing desire to satisfy the human palate to the point of promoting serious animal mistreatment. Some old Catholic manualists might even advert to the term, “morose delectation” to describe the root problem of a disordered palate that promotes other disorders. Moreover, even those animals used for legitimate purposes ought to be treated humanely with reasonable housing, care, food, companionship and pain control if needed.

Animals are a vulnerable part of creation, and that vulnerability should

continually prompt us to examine our decisions on how we relate to them. To the extent that we are attentive to the weakness and vulnerability not only of our brother human beings, but even of our friends in the animal kingdom, we decide the sort of society we will become: either a society marked by respect, kindness and reason; or one that is marked by various forms of barbarism.

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