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# Arkangel Comment



*This is the section of the magazine where you get to have your say. We try to print everything we receive - providing it is to do with Animal Liberation, and is not intended to further some other aim - political or otherwise. The articles do not necessarily represent the views of the editors. Please remember, an article submitted on computer disk (any format) will save us a lot of typing, but of course we welcome your thoughts in any form!*

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## Humans Are Animals Too

by David Olivier

Translation by Pierre Querinci

- *Should animal liberation activists ally themselves with no matter whom, including extreme right-wing activists?*
- *Should we ignore those traditional political problems which relate only to humans?*
- *What should our attitude be towards speciesists and meat-eaters?*
- *Should we, in the struggle for animal liberation, favour economic sabotage and direct action or rather theoretical, cultural and overt political action?*

Five years ago in the pamphlet '*Nous ne mangeons pas de viande pour ne pas tuer d'animaux*' ("We do not eat meat so as not to kill animals"),<sup>1</sup> about non-vegetarians who campaign for human causes I wrote: "I have spent a good part of my life fighting at their sides against racism, sexism and oppression of humans, etc. I should still like to feel motivated to do so today, but I cannot. One small point nags at me (...): how can they demonstrate against a murder when they so easily kill each day?"

This passage, which seems to have been misunderstood by those who criticize us, was intended to express not an indifference towards the struggles against racism, sexism etc., but rather a tension between, on the one hand, my wish to participate in them and, on the other hand, my feelings towards the persons with whom I would be involved. Faced with the enormity of the violence inherent to the oppression of non-humans I find it difficult, as others do, not to be put off, sickened even, by the attitude of those who devote themselves, often generously but so exclusively, to human problems while at the same time deliberately and gratuitously participating in the butchery of non-humans.<sup>2</sup>

This profound uneasiness easily translates into hostility and even hatred towards meat-eaters. These negative feelings

themselves warrant criticism; a point I return to below. This can go even farther. For a long time, when first I became an animal rights activist, I was no longer able to feel any empathy, not only towards meat-eaters campaigning against human suffering, but also towards human suffering itself, towards the suffering with which campaigners of recognized causes are routinely concerned. I felt only annoyance or hostility, or at best indifference, towards children with muscular dystrophy, victims of famine, exploited workers, deported immigrants and raped women, and this not because these humans eat meat like everyone else, but simply because they were, being humans, the objects of the selective sympathy of "right-thinking" persons. Every human being, however unfortunate he or she might be, I saw only as part of the globally privileged category to which the human species belongs.

This is what I *felt*, but it is not what I *thought*. In spite of what I felt I never *thought* that human suffering deserved indifference or hostility; this kind of resentment - as should be immediately obvious to all - is absurd and unjust. An individual may well be part of a globally privileged category without thereby necessarily being privileged him or herself. Even if s/he is, the privilege is of necessity relative and does not render the suffering unimportant. There is always

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someone worse off than oneself but the existence of pains greater than my own does not make mine negligible. If I were a black South African I would no doubt find it difficult not to hate all white South Africans, even babies. Similarly it is quite natural for someone dying of AIDS in the third world, where money spent on prevention is ridiculously small, to feel aggressive towards the obscene Telethons which raise the equivalent of tens of millions of pounds for a handful of sick people in France; and it would be difficult to keep this resentment from rebounding upon these sick people themselves. It is natural to feel that way, but it is not *right*. Even if it is natural that an animal rights activist should share the feelings I have described, s/he is never justified in allowing such feelings to determine her or his political judgement.



One often hears animal liberation activists saying things like: "The sufferings to which animals are subjected are incomparably more numerous and more intense than those of human beings." That they are more numerous, I agree; but as to their being more intense: I don't. There is no reason to assert that the sufferings inflicted upon individual non-humans is always more intense than that of individual humans. I would much rather be an elephant in Africa, even if my destiny was to be killed by a poacher after a period of untroubled existence, than a poor child dying of malnutrition or even a rich one with muscular dystrophy. I am not even sure that the lot of the human populations which kill elephants in Africa is not itself more tragic, because of the extent and degree of their own sufferings, than that of the elephants themselves. The fact that I am an animal rights activist does not imply that, when I have to choose between improving the lot of some elephants and that of some humans, I should automatically choose to favour the elephants. Humans are animals too.

On the other hand it *is* true that the sufferings inflicted on non-humans are, taken all together, much more numerous, and their intensity is often comparable to human suffering at its worst. This would certainly be a reason for giving priority to animal liberation - *if it is necessary to make such a choice*. I must emphasise that this is a global judgement. Individuals themselves are to count equally; i.e. the like suffering of one individual or of another is of equal importance, regardless of the group to which s/he belongs. If one has to choose between helping one or the other of two given groups, numbers should be taken into account, but numbers are a characteristic of groups, not of individuals. One may not say that the suffering of one *individual* is less important than that of another, when both suffer equally. The fact that (in France) ten times as many pigs are slaughtered as are calves does not make the suffering of one calf less important than that of one pig!

I have laboured this point because I think it brings out an essential aspect of animal liberation: that individuals should be taken into account for what they are, not as

representatives of a more or less arbitrarily formed group - whether it be that of humans or non-humans, of blacks or whites, or of left-handed people or of those born on Tuesdays. Like any liberation movement animal liberation has to base its struggle on existing categories: we speak of animal liberation as if the category of (non-human) animals were in itself a valid one. As with all liberation movements, however, the objective is to *abolish* such categories *qua* discriminatory categories. The attitude that we sometimes see and that gives priority to non-humans while putting off to some indeterminate future the tackling of the most serious human problems, simply because they are problems of humans, only serves to consolidate the boundary between humans and non-humans that is established by the ideology we are fighting.



Some will object that one important difference between humans and other animals is that when the former eat meat they are oppressors and therefore do not deserve our compassion. This vengeful attitude which casts all humans together also shows up in the statements we hear such as: "All humans who exploit and eat animals are the same. Only humans who do not exploit animals have worth." In other words only very few people have worth. This is, as I have said, a natural reaction, but not a right one. Did my nature change the day when, at 29 years of age, I ceased to eat meat? Did I deserve before that all the ills which could befall me, but not after? Again, this sounds absurd to me. Had my personal circumstances not been favourable no doubt I would not have become a vegetarian. Had I had to fight for survival in some part of Rio de Janeiro I would not have given the matter any thought at all. It would not have been any more *right* for me to continue eating meat; but that's what I would have done. I find it difficult to believe that we have a kind of essence that changes so completely according to random circumstances.

All of this, you may say, is just discussing pure principles, a kind of vain intellectual masturbation.<sup>3</sup> We are frequently told that we must fight for "the actual, physical, liberation of animals here and now." What we are not told is just how this is to be accomplished. How does one achieve the actual, physical, liberation of the 800 million chickens the French eat every year? By opening their cages? Or through a campaign of economic sabotage carried out by a handful of masked activists? This is absurd. The only way is to *convince* at least a great proportion of the humans who eat meat to stop doing so - in other words, to act upon their ideas. Opening cages, sabotaging businesses, become very important if they serve to propagate ideas, to publicize them, and to give them impact. In France there have been illegal acts, that have actually and physically liberated a few animals, but unfortunately they serve relatively little purpose as long as all that the activists do in matter of propaganda is to paint slogans like "Vivisectors are monsters." The fact is that this is not true; vivisectors are no more monsters than I am myself or are the readers of Arkangel, who, for

most of them, ate meat during a great part of their lives in full knowledge of the fact that it was the flesh of a sentient being who had been killed to provide it. Illegal action would be much more useful if, generally speaking, it was conceived primarily as a means of illustrating and propagating the ideas of the animal liberation movement, i.e. the simple fact that the interests of individuals should be respected equally regardless of what species they belong to.

Jeering at our opponents has no practical value unless it can bring them to change their ways; and if they are able to change it is because their basic character is not defined by their present behaviour. In practice, as in theory, it is not individual meat-eaters who must be censured, it is their actions. These individuals, whether we like it or not, must be seen as potential allies. If we feel nothing but hostility or indifference towards human meat-eaters and their problems, how shall we be able to convert them? If we do not share the compassion and solicitude they have for their fellow humans, where in them shall we find compassion and solicitude for non-humans? Moreover, if we reject intellectual activity how shall we bring about such a major cultural change as the abolition of speciesism?

To say, as is said, that liberating animals should have priority over liberating human beings is all very well in theory if one has to choose between liberating the ones or the others; but, in practice, does this choice have to be made? To me personally it seems clear that human misery is one of the main obstacles in the way of animal liberation. The more human beings are oppressed the more they tend to be themselves oppressors. This was clear among humans in Germany after the first world war, in Vietnam after the departure of the Americans, and in Algeria after the departure of the French. It is confirmed every day in the poverty-stricken ghettos of the United States and South America, and one may fear it will be confirmed in South Africa. Closer to here it is confirmed each time an exploited worker, on returning home, abuses his wife, his children and his dog. It seems difficult to me to persuade human beings who live in the direst misery to stop oppressing non-humans. Let me be clear about this. It is not a question of saying that in these cases "human beings are really more important." It is simply that, as we say, "an empty belly has no ears." The fact that it *should* in no way changes the fact that it *doesn't*.

The struggle waged against human suffering therefore has for me, in addition to its intrinsic importance - that of that suffering itself - an indirect importance, because of its relevance to animal liberation. I am sometimes inclined to think that in order to bring about animal liberation in the long term it would be best to forget about it for today and to concentrate on improving human conditions. This too however would be wrong because I also believe that, reciprocally, one of the best things that can help human liberation is to forward animal liberation. To coin a phrase which, of course, by itself proves nothing but which rings

true and encapsulates the idea, I would say that a species which oppresses others cannot itself be free. Speciesism is a lie with which humans deceive themselves, and exposing this lie can only help progress. Since at present there are so few of us who do expose this lie, it is certainly by doing so that we can make most impact.

All this may seem very convoluted, or outright cynical; it looks like saying that human liberation would merely be a means to animal liberation - and vice versa... The thing is that, I believe, contrary to a deeply entrenched political tradition, liberation, be it of humans or of animals, will not come about tomorrow morning.<sup>4</sup> Between now and then there is a great deal of ground to cover. In walking from point A to point B, whether or not the priority is to get the left foot to B or the right one, both feet must be moved. Little progress would be made in following the advice of those who say, "First let's get our left foot there, and after that we will care for the right foot."<sup>5</sup>

This does not prevent us from reaffirming whenever appropriate, as a matter of principle, that since the sufferings of non-humans are as important as those of humans, and because the former are much more numerous than the latter, the liberation of non-humans is the more important. On the other hand those who think that certain individuals, because they are humans and Jewish, Arab, Black, female or whatever, should be oppressed, cannot be seen as treading the same path as ourselves just because they also campaign for animals. I have no hatred for right-wing activists but I do not see how we can think of making progress in promoting the struggle for equality of all individuals by allying with them. I do not see what can physically be gained by it. I do not see how the public can be expected to understand anything about the animal liberation message unless we stand by the principle that to oppress an individual human is as serious, nor more nor less, as oppressing a non-human. It is not a question of expressing a preference for an anti-racist vivisector or a right-wing vegetarian, as we are summoned by our critics to do, for someone paralysed in the left foot or in the right one - it is a matter of knowing with whom we can progress towards the desired goal.<sup>6</sup>



A common element in the negative feelings I have criticized here, which, as I have said, I have myself felt, is a hostility towards humans culminating in a sort of inverted speciesism. This is understandable when it is realized that humans have the capacity to understand their actions but do not use it, whereas a cat, when s/he plays with a mouse, having no notion of responsibility, is innocent.

The concept of responsibility is a complex one, and I shall not plunge into a discussion of it here. Let me just say that although I do believe it is very important that everyone should see him or herself as responsible as possible for her or his actions, in the sense that no one else makes the decisions for him or her, and although I consider it very

important to stress this point - by for example by telling each meat-eater that it is s/he who is responsible for the raising and slaughtering of cattle - I give only a limited practical value, and no theoretical value at all, to the punitive aspect of responsibility, i.e. to the notion of culpability. To say that I was guilty when I used to eat meat does not lessen by one gram the amount I ate. If I ate meat, it means the circumstances in which I found myself coupled with the degree of intelligence and courage I then had or hadn't made me act as I did. Period. Similarly to hate and scorn evil meat-eaters in no way helps the animals and will have no concrete result other than giving the scorners a feeling of satisfaction about being able to view themselves as better than all others.

The attitude I prefer, and which finally managed to bring me a minimum of peace of mind in my dealings with meat-eaters, is to view them with the same indulgence as that with which we may view non-humans; to view them as, for example, we view cats. What they are doing may well be terrible, and be terribly sad, when one considers how easy it would be for them to do otherwise; but at the same time they are not fundamentally evil. Often they are kind and benevolent. Just like our minds, theirs are full of false ideas, to which they cling. Hypocrisy is rampant among them, and their efforts to be otherwise are meek. Unlike cats they are accessible to discussion - sometimes with the help of a kick in the pants - so let's try by those means to push them in the right direction.

I also see an anti-human attitude in the oft expressed idea that the only thing which animals want is to be left alone, "to live in peace." Implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, this attitude conveys the idea that humans can do nothing but harm to animals; that humans are a perverse and evil species (there is a diversity of myths carried around about this - that only humans kill their own kind; that only humans kill needlessly; that only humans rape; that only humans are cruel, and so on). Certainly, in view of the suffering and killing due to factory farming, it would be better if we were to allow the animals to live without human meddling; but I do not see any reason to forget that in nature too animals suffer intensely, from disease, famine, emotional deprivation, and predation by other animals. I do not see why suffering, just because it is not inflicted by humans, should not be regarded as important, and I suspect that put together such suffering is even greater than that which results from animal husbandry and so on. It cannot be on our agenda today to call upon humans to do much against this suffering, as long as they themselves continue to cause such great suffering gratuitously; but as far as I can see, converting all humans to vegetarianism is itself in a way just one first step. For this reason too, it is in my view vital that this vegetarianism should come about as a consequence of the downfall of speciesism rather than being the result of worries about cholesterol levels or just a change in fashion.

Human beings, whether they like it or not, are the masters of the planet; this is what evolution has brought about. There is nothing in it to be proud of, or ashamed of. Were we not the ones, maybe after another few million years some other species would have done it - another ape maybe, or some other of the more intelligent species. It just happens to be us, and it gives us responsibility. We should make the best of it, for all sentient beings.<sup>7</sup> What some snort down at as being just "human-human" affairs concerns more than just humans. The mental health of humanity and its capacity for benevolence are of the utmost importance for the well-being of all, human and non-human. Unfortunately this mental health is not at its best, and to make it better I see no use in allying ourselves, in pursuit of a mythical quick result, with those very people whose ideas are in a fundamental way directly opposed to this objective, whose ideas promote only hatred and desolation.



Notes to accompany the text:

<sup>1</sup> Collective pamphlet, published by Y. Bonnardel (1989), available from *Les Cahiers antispecistes*, 20 rue d'Aguesseau, 69007 Lyon, France. Cost 18FF or £2 pp.

<sup>2</sup> The waters are muddied somewhat by the fact that there are also many humanists who in fact don't care about the fate of human beings - their fate being of less concern to them than the maintenance of the species barrier as a moral barrier. It is these people who ask, like F. Reynaert did in *Le Nouvel Observateur* (29.10.1992) "How far shall we go in negating humanity if, today, we demand that cattle be accorded the same solicitude as was accorded to Blacks yesterday?"

<sup>3</sup> Some of us, at the *Cahiers antispecistes* and elsewhere, are sometimes accused of working only for our own "intellectual pleasure." This reproach is aggressive and unfair. Each one of us has, in addition to her or his sincere and publicly advertised goals, other, more down-to-earth motivations which are just as real but tend to be less advertised; in my case there is indeed a certain intellectual pleasure, and a pleasure that comes from trying to change the world, from meeting celebrities, from getting known, from typing on a keyboard, and also a certain pleasure in feeling myself morally superior at small cost - this last unpublicized motivation being in my eyes the most dangerous one. In all groups there is also the attraction of making new friends. Some activists seem to find it necessary to go as far as possible in the opposite direction, into asceticism, into taking no pleasure in this sinful world as long as there still are animals in pain - no pleasure, except the one that comes from feeling morally superior, from being part of the small elite group of "good," virtuous humans. What actual and physical effect will such an attitude have, if not that of turning away most potential activists? The existence of additional, unpublicized motivations does not disqualify the more openly advertised ones. The only

important thing is to ensure that there are no contradictions between them - or at least, not too many. For my part I believe that the pleasure of trying to show how intellectually fecund challenging speciesism can be can help to attract influential intellectuals. On the other hand, one of the main themes of the present article is to nail in the fact that self-indulging in the pleasure of putting oneself on a pedestal, in pouring scorn upon the pains and worries of mister average, with all his imperfections, does *not* advance the cause of animal liberation.

<sup>4</sup>A large part of the literature from ALF sympathisers exhort us to save animals here and now; but how many animals can one sincerely believe to be able to save here and now? Similarly, how do these activists propose to change, in practice, all omnivorous humans into vegetarians? In my view, the kind of attitude which calls for direct radical action as opposed to "pointless discussion," an attitude found in revolutionary circles as well as elsewhere, compensates for, and conceals, a sense of despair, an unconscious lack of belief in the real possibility of radical change both in the short and long terms. Everyone knows that saving animals here and now is possible only on a relatively very small scale. Once we on the contrary really believe, be it as in my case not unreservedly, in the possibility of long term radical change saving the millions of millions of animals who otherwise would certainly be reared and slaughtered in the coming centuries, it seems to me that this is the most worthwhile objective for our struggle. This implies arguing in a different way, perhaps in a more abstract way, but with results just as real and physical as a goal.

This should not prevent us from saving animals here and now whenever possible, not even prevent us from doing no more than that if that is what we feel best fitted to do; but there is no reason why those who choose to undertake direct action should denigrate and put spokes in the wheels of those who believe in other forms or action. They could instead ask themselves how immediate direct action could at the same time contribute to long term goals.

<sup>5</sup>I want to stress that this convergence concerns liberation movements in the long term, and results from their basic logical unity. On the other hand there is no reason for, in the short term, anything which benefits one oppressed group

to also benefit all others. It is for example a pure coincidence that vegetarianism benefits both non-humans and third world peoples. So much the better if it does, but there is no reason to postulate a sort of cosmic harmony which will always make the interests of all oppressed come together. There may well be for example a conflict between the interests of many third world people and those of the fish they eat. As another example, the Second World War was a catastrophe for humans; but for the wild animals living in France, where hunting was at that time forbidden (because possession of guns was restricted), it was a blessing.

<sup>6</sup>Here too I have to stress that this is only the case for long term projects. If it is a matter of my helping a road accident victim I see no reason to refuse aid from whomever it may be. In such a case I may well have personal preferences depending on the circumstances: if the victim is a coloured person I prefer the helper to be an anti-racist vivisector rather than a right-wing vegetarian; if the victim is a chicken, my preferences are reversed. For several years a friend and I have helped an old lady who looks after feral cats. We always regretted her being an anti-Semite who voted for the Front National, and a meat-eater, but at the same time we found her devotion to those cats admirable. I have never had qualms about helping her in her tasks, but it would have been quite another matter working with that sort of person for animal liberation - since animal liberation means aiming at equality for *all* sentient beings, including equality for all humans.

<sup>7</sup>Some may say at this point that I show myself here to be speciesist, in that I place human beings in command. However, *I* am not the one who places them in command, that is just how things are, at least in this century. Moreover, the difference I see in humans is *qua* moral agents - i.e. the fact that humans, being generally better capable than individuals from other species to modify their environment according their intentions, and also to universalise their spontaneous goodwill through ethical reasoning, are moral agents, which other animals are not, or to a lesser degree. I give no special status to humans *qua* moral patients, i.e. no special intrinsic importance to their pains and pleasure. Denying the factual differences which often exist between individuals of different species has never been the aim of the anti-speciesist struggle.

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## Ostriches in Scotland

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Justice & Rights, a group dedicated to stopping the import, export and exploitation of the ostrich is urging people to write strong letters of complaint to the Secretary of State for Scotland at the Scottish Office after it was disclosed that a slaughterhouse has been authorized to kill thousands of ostriches at Ellon, Aberdeenshire.

*The Scottish Office, St Andrews House, Edinburgh EH1 3DG (0131 244 2683 Fax: 0131 244 2683).  
Aberdeenshire Council, Planning and Economic Development, Gordon House, Blackhall Road,  
Inverurie AB51 3WA (01467 620981 Fax: 01467 624285).*

For further information concerning the campaign to stop the exploitation of the ostrich please contact:  
J & R Associates, PO Box 83, Bracknell, Berkshire RG12 7QH.