

Animal Rights  
or  
Human Responsibilities?



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# Animal Rights or Human responsibilities?

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## **Introduction**

In their efforts to protect animals from unnecessary suffering, some people want to extend the fight for human rights and liberation to animals. While this sounds appealing, it confuses the meaning of rights and liberation.

There is an important difference between advocating humane treatment for animals and granting them moral or legal rights. Where animal advocates are concerned primarily with human responsibilities towards animals, animal liberationists pit animal rights against human needs. This undermines efforts to create a humane society that can protect people and animals.

## **The human domination of Nature**

Animal liberationists argue that cruelty towards animals and destruction of the environment arise from the human domination of Nature. They point to pre-historic societies where people supposedly lived in harmony with Nature. However, harmony between the human and non-human world is possible only in a Garden of Eden, where God provides everything so that people don't have to wrestle their survival from Nature.

In the real world, all species struggle to survive. There is no lasting balance or harmony. There is violence, turbulence and change. Continents rise from the sea and are later submerged. There is mass extinction of species and the emergence of new species. Suns explode. Galaxies implode. Order dissolves into chaos, and out of chaos emerges new order. All things come into being and pass away.

Human history is rooted in our struggle to control Nature – to secure our food supply, shelter and clothe ourselves, manage our fertility, mend bones, heal wounds, combat disease and prolong

life. Agriculture and the domestication of animals are based on the assumption that people must manipulate the environment to survive.

Pre-class societies took from Nature what they needed – cutting trees, mining minerals, domesticating animals, and selectively breeding to change other species to meet human needs. At the same time, they were conscious of their responsibility to the next generation and guarded the non-human world as a life-giving force. They took only what they needed and wasted nothing. For most of human history, people lived this way.

About 10,000 years ago, class divisions appeared. Feudal rulers proclaimed their divine right to take the biggest and best of what Nature and human skill had to offer. Responsibility for the natural world was replaced by the duty to provide for the elite.

The development of capitalism, just a few hundred years ago, forced a much greater change. Before capitalism, ruling families consumed the surplus. Capitalism shifted the goal of production from consumption to accumulation, fundamentally changing the way people relate to each other and to the environment.

## **Profit madness**

Capital accumulation is based on the exploitation of the human and non-human world. While there is a limit to how much surplus can be consumed, there is no limit to how much capital can be accumulated.

Every capitalist is in a race to accumulate more capital, or profit, than his competitors. Those who fall behind go under. It doesn't matter how much capital they have, no one can leave the race.

Even a giant corporation like Microsoft must acquire more capital to stay ahead of its competitors.

Because every capitalist must compete or die, nothing, not even the continued existence of life on Earth, matters more than “accumulation for the sake of accumulation, production for the sake of production.” In that sense, the pursuit of profit is mindless.

People have always used Nature to meet their needs. Capitalism is the first society to do this with no regard for the consequences.

To justify profit madness, ancient customs and traditions had to be swept away. In the 17th century, René Descartes declared that people had souls, whereas animals were merely things. Descartes considered the cry of an animal in pain to be no more significant than the squeak of a rusty cog in a machine. This “Cartesian split” divided the human and non-human world, disconnecting humanity from its animal origins and its historic relationship with Nature.

Capitalism artificially divided humanity into “races,” making it possible to designate some people as sub-human. Racism was used to justify colonial exploitation and the slave trade. The treatment of African Blacks in slave ships rivals the most brutal examples of animal abuse. As recently as 1857, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that slaves were property, not people. Racism continues to justify America’s wars of acquisition, its mass incarceration of the poor, and the organized thievery that leaves billions in dire poverty.

Capitalist exploitation is immensely destructive to the human and the non-human world. Workers are used up and thrown away. Nature is pillaged for raw materials on the one end and used as a massive toilet at the other end. Hurricane Katrina demonstrated how disregard for people, animals, and the environment go hand-in-hand. The only reason that people are not also slaughtered for

profit by the food industry is that, unlike animals, we can organize in self-defence.

## **Speciesism**

In 1970, Richard D. Ryder coined the phrase “speciesism” to describe the practice of favoring or assigning greater value to one species over another. A speciesist is someone who places human needs above the needs of other species.

Animal liberationists reject speciesism by insisting that animals be given the same consideration as human beings, that is, they should not be regarded as property or treated as resources for human purposes (food, clothing, scientific research, etc.), but should instead be regarded as legal persons and members of society with equal rights. There are many problems with this stance.

Animals do not recognize the rights of other animals. They kill and eat each other instinctively. The right of one animal to dinner interferes with the right of another animal to live. To survive, every species must place its needs above those of other species. We eat plants and animals. We don't allow them to eat us.

Medicine assumes that human life has supreme value. When my patient has pneumonia, I try to destroy the invading micro-organism. I do not grant the HIV virus the same right to live as a human being. Survival demands that we value human life over non-human life. That does not mean that animals must be cruelly treated. However, it does mean that they cannot have equal rights.

# Human rights

There's no such thing as absolute rights, even for human beings.

The concept of human rights originated with the French Revolution (1789-1799), when the rising capitalist class appealed to the masses for help to overthrow the feudal aristocracy. After the dust settled, it became clear that 'Liberty, Equality and Brotherhood' meant the right of capitalists to exploit workers and peasants. The American people suffered a similar bait-and-switch. After vanquishing their British colonial masters, they discovered that "all men are created equal and endowed with inalienable rights" applied only to White male property owners.

Human rights are shaped by class society. The rights of slave-owners conflict with the rights of slaves, the rights of employers conflict with the rights of workers, and the right of the KKK to free speech conflicts with the right of their targets to remain safe. Consequently, we must choose what is right, who has rights (and who does not), and how people and animals will be treated. The difficulty of such choices causes some people to promote universal rights for all. However, such abstract moralism only serves the dominant class.

While animal liberationists view the struggle for animal rights as an extension of the fight for human rights, human rights are never bestowed by the oppressor. Women's rights, minority rights, workers' rights, etc, have been won only by people fighting on their own behalf, creating their own history. As Frederick Douglass pointed out,

"Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will."

The example of the United Nations proves that a moral proclamation of rights, with no way to enforce them, is not worth the paper on which it is written.

Animals cannot organize on their own behalf. As Steve Rose observes,

“It is not the animals who are demanding rights, but the humans who are conferring rights upon the animals. This argument is not about the rights of animals but about the duties of human beings.”

Freeing animals from human control would be disastrous. Domesticated animals cannot survive on their own, and people who rely on animals for food would starve. The only way to free Nature from human control is to eliminate the human species. While some believe that human extinction is the only way to save the planet, such despair cannot take us forward.

## **Animal research**

Science is the sum of all human knowledge, skill and experience. Capitalism perverts human know-how to such an extent that some people reject science altogether and advocate a return to hunting and gathering. This makes no sense. All human societies, including those of hunters and gatherers, are based on science, on our need to know the world in which we live.

The problem is not science, but how capitalism uses science to benefit a powerful elite at the expense of everything else. More than 95 percent of all science funding is dedicated to military and corporate (for-profit) research. Most of this would be unnecessary if science were directed to meet human need.

An example of unnecessary research is the way that military surgeons are trained to operate on the battlefield. A pig is seriously wounded and the surgeon is required to resuscitate it. Once the animal's condition is stabilized, it is repeatedly wounded until the surgeon can no longer keep it alive. Wounded soldiers will undoubtedly benefit. However, the wounding of soldiers and pigs is based on the assumption that war must continue. In fact, most people oppose war. In a genuine democracy, war would end immediately, along with the torturing of pigs.

In response to the horrible conditions imposed on some research animals, animal liberationists condemn all animal research. Their demand to end all animal testing endangers essential medical research.

Some medical experiments can be done on animal cells and tissues. Other research, like developing human vaccines, requires live animal testing at some stage. If we want new medicines, then we must test them on animals or we must test them on people. Thalidomide is a drug that was not subjected to enough animal testing, with catastrophic results for thousands of children born with gross deformities. The only country that ever banned animal experiments completely was Nazi Germany during the 1930s. They experimented on people instead.

HIV/AIDS has infected more than 33 million people. Every year, more than 2 million die of the disease and 2.5 million are newly infected. If we want an HIV/AIDS vaccine, then we must experiment on primates. Stopping this research would condemn millions more people to death – unless we decided not to create a vaccine and give everyone anti-retroviral drugs instead. However, this option would never be implemented under capitalism, because the right of drug companies to profit conflicts with the right of people to life-saving medicines.

The question of animal testing obscures a more important question. Who decides the goals and priorities of society and of science?

The pursuit of profit generates countless unsafe products and barbaric practices. In a genuine democracy, we could choose to eliminate toxic products, improving our own health and reducing the need for animal testing. However, capitalism deprives the majority of the right to decide such matters. Instead of demanding a halt to animal testing, we should demand a halt to capitalism, so that animal testing can be reserved for truly necessary research and conducted as humanely as possible.

## **Food animals and food workers**

People can raise and eat animals without being cruel to them. Food animals can be raised with kindness and provided with better, longer lives than they would ever have in the wild. This could be a mutually beneficial relationship: we feed them, and they feed us.

The capitalist food industry is completely different – a source of immense cruelty towards animals and workers. While animal liberationists condemn how food animals are reared and slaughtered, they typically ignore the plight of food workers.

Upton Sinclair's 1906 novel, *The Jungle*, outraged America by exposing barbaric conditions in the meatpacking industry. Over the following decades, labor unions fought and won better working conditions, wages, and benefits. These improvements were short-lived. In "The Chain Never Stops" (Mother Jones, July/August 2001) Eric Schlosser explains,

"Starting in the early 1960s, a company called Iowa Beef Packers (IBP) began to revolutionize the industry, opening plants in rural areas far from union strongholds, recruiting immigrant workers

from Mexico, introducing a new division of labor that eliminated the need for skilled butchers, and ruthlessly battling unions. By the late 1970s, meatpacking companies that wanted to compete with IBP had to adopt its business methods – or go out of business.”

By 2001, 85 percent of the U.S. meatpacking industry was controlled by four corporations: IBP, ConAgra, Excel, and National Beef. These fiercely anti-union giants dominate a primarily immigrant workforce, many of whom are undocumented. Wages have plummeted and conditions made intolerable for workers and the animals they process. Schlosser writes,

“The typical [production] line speed in an American slaughterhouse 25 years ago was about 175 cattle per hour. Some line speeds now approach 400 cattle per hour.”

Faster means cheaper and more profitable. Faster also means more frightening and more dangerous.

Meatpacking is America’s most dangerous occupation. Officially, more than 40,000 meatpacking workers are injured on the job every year. The actual number is much higher, because the industry is notorious for not reporting injuries, falsifying injury data, and minimizing lost workdays by firing injured workers or forcing them back to work prematurely.

In 2004, a Human Rights Watch Report: *Blood, Sweat and Fear: Workers’ Rights in U.S. Meat and Poultry Plants* concluded, “workers [in the meat and poultry industry] ... contend with conditions, vulnerabilities, and abuses which violate human rights.”

The condition of food animals cannot be separated from the condition of food workers. As the drive for profit ratchets up the

speed of production, all consideration for living beings falls away. No time is allowed to kill humanely. No time is allowed to maintain sanitary conditions. Animals and workers are both terrorized.

In a classic divide-and-rule maneuver, employers encourage workers to vent their rage on animals. In 2004, workers at a chicken-processing plant in Moorefield, West Virginia, were discovered torturing chickens, with the apparent approval of management. Incidents of torture increased when employees were forced to work overtime. Such cruelty is profitable for the capitalist. As long as workers are attacking animals, they are not demanding better conditions for themselves and for the animals.

Who can solve this problem? The capitalist State grants the employer the exclusive right to make a profit and to manage the workplace, which is considered his private property. Consequently, conditions improve only when workers fight back.

Food workers who improve their own conditions automatically improve the condition of food animals and the safety of the meat produced. Animal rights advocates and food workers should be natural allies, but middle-class moralism gets in the way.

## **Middle-class moralism**

“The warring classes will seek to gain victory by every means, while middle-class moralists will continue to wander in confusion between the two camps. Subjectively they sympathize with the oppressed – no one doubts that. Objectively, they remain captives of the morality of the ruling class and seek to impose it upon the oppressed instead of helping them to elaborate the morality of revolution.” – Leon Trotsky

Over the course of the 20th century, colonial wars, two World Wars, and the threat of atomic annihilation revealed the destructive potential of science. Socialists condemned capitalism for applying science in these ways. Middle-class moralists saw it differently. They argued that science was *inherently* dangerous and destructive.

A similar argument, advanced by anarchists, is that all forms of power (including efforts to control Nature) are corrupting. Therefore, we must abandon efforts to control anything. This is mistaken. Power, the ability to control events, can be a liberating force.

Power is not the problem. The problem is unequal access to power. If we abandon the fight to take collective control of society, we will not survive.

Using moralistic arguments, sections of the peace movement, the ecology movement, anarchists, eco-feminists, and animal liberationists attack the right of humanity to control Nature. While Nature has not benefited from these attacks, conservative social forces have benefited.

If human beings have no right to control Nature, then they have no right to use contraception and abortion. An abstract reverence for life ('right-to-life') supports the oppression of women.

Colorado is considering an amendment to grant legal rights to fertilized human eggs. Voters would be asked whether inalienable rights, the right to due process and equal justice should be granted to "any human being from the moment of fertilization." Ignored is the fact that 'equal rights' for embryos violates the right of women to control their bodies.

Middle-class moralism blames people, especially poor people, for the environmental destruction caused by capitalism. Attributing environmental problems to 'overpopulation' supports racist population control and anti-immigration policies. If you think that too many people are endangering the planet, then you would have to cheer every war, famine, flood, earthquake and epidemic that reduces the population.

In fact, environmental damage is accelerating despite falling global birth rates. Between 1970 and 2000, the fertility rate in the world's poor nations dropped by more than half. In Europe, it is below replacement level. The United States has the greatest impact on the environment, yet its fertility rate has been below replacement level for the past three decades. The root cause of the environmental crisis is not people but profit madness.

James Lovelock disagrees. "We, personally, are the polluters...We are therefore accountable, personally...for the silent spring that Rachel Carson predicted." The *New York Times* takes the same position. "We simply cannot continue to hold our national security and the health of the planet hostage to our appetite for fossil fuels."

There is no "we," when it comes to who is responsible for human and environmental degradation. The real world is divided into warring classes. The capitalist class seeks to increase its wealth and power. The working class struggles to resist exploitation and oppression. The middle-class sidesteps this conflict by demanding that everyone have equal rights, human and non-human alike.

Animal rights advocates do not support food workers to improve the conditions of food animals. Instead, they take the middle-class position of attacking food corporations and their employees. The moralistic pronouncement that "meat is murder" places meat-packers in the same category as the killers of human beings. This is

one example of how arguments for animal rights leads to attacks on the working class.

Most animal liberationists condemn meat-eating in the belief that being vegetarian is the only way to protect food animals. This is mistaken. The 2006 strikes in support of immigrants' rights achieved what vegetarians have never accomplished – they closed America's feedlots and slaughterhouses.

The middle class does not see the power of the working class to change society. Instead, it seeks reform from the capitalist State, which seizes every opportunity to advance the capitalist class, hypocritically using the concept of 'equal rights' to protect embryos, while abandoning already-existing children to die of starvation and preventable diseases.

## **The challenge to master ourselves**

There is so much that we don't know about the natural world. At the same time, there is no corner of the globe, and no species, that is not affected by human activity. Therefore, we have a duty to be responsible towards the environment. This cannot happen as long as profit rules society. The only way to restore collective responsibility for our world is to take collective control of society.

All animals alter their environment in the process of meeting their needs. Human beings are the first to do so consciously. We are the only species capable of learning and applying the laws of Nature to enhance our survival, which includes protecting the environment on which our survival depends.

While human beings have the ability to control Nature, we have not yet learned to master ourselves. This is the supreme challenge of our species.

How people relate to the non-human world has always been shaped by how they relate to each other. For more than 150,000 years, people lived in egalitarian societies that promoted responsibility towards the natural world. Even today, most people support human responsibility for the environment. The problem is capitalism, which blocks the majority from exercising any real control over society.

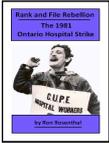
The fate of the animal world is inextricably tied to our own. As long as some people are allowed to exploit other people, animals will also be abused. Replacing capitalism with a cooperative socialist society will effectively end profit madness and all the human and animal suffering that goes with it.

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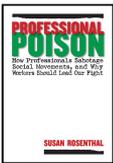
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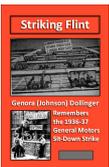
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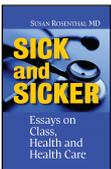
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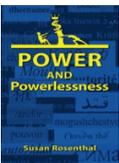


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