

# The Darwinist's Dilemma<sup>1</sup>

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Long, long ago, in 1965, the *Sunday Times* invited me to write a full-page article on a subject of my own choice. I did so and I gave the article a title, 'The Rights of Animals', which I now see, with pleasure, has been attached to this symposium.<sup>2</sup>

For my part, I picked the title by deliberate analogy with – or, more precisely and more pointedly, by deliberate extrapolation from – the title of Thomas Paine's book (of 1791 and 1792) *The Rights of Man*.

In other words, yes, I was deliberately associating the case for non-human animals with that clutch of egalitarian or libertarian ideas which have sporadically, though quite often with impressively actual political results, come to the rescue of other oppressed classes, such as slaves or homosexuals or women. I implied that the high barrier we have put up between the human species and all the rest of the animal species, the barrier to which Richard Ryder presently gave the very useful name of 'speciesism', was essentially a class barrier, unjustified by reason and kept in place by the superstition and self-interest of those who were on the privileged side of it.

To the impulse towards egalitarianism and social justice I ascribe no historical or political coherency, and still less any historical inevitability. If there *is* anything so coherent as a movement, it has made such huge detours that you could often think it was moving backwards.

All the same, I think one can detect some coherency and even a sort of inevitability in some such progression in at least some people's private histories, the histories of their thoughts.

So far as I can tell, the original class distinction (original, that is, in each individual's experience) is the tremendous gulf between Me and All the Rest of You; any difference I see between You and You is tiny compared with the enormous difference between Me and All Other, a difference I experience in the fact that if I bump you on the head, whether You are in this case animate or a lump of stone, I merely observe the result, whereas if I get bumped on the head the universe, my universe, is totally occupied by an actual, vivid and very unpleasant sensation.

Presently, however, there arises in most of us (perhaps not in psychopaths) a faculty of imagination (I can only label, not describe it), which informs Me that to you, You are a Me. It is this faculty, with its ability to inhabit the other side of the barrier, that knocks the class barrier down. It can never rid me of my egocentric vision. But it persuades me that if I want to make a just appraisal of reality (and I do want to; it's not a virtue; I can't help it) then I must perform a series of intellectual adjustments to discount the distorting effect of the particular point of view from which I am obliged to observe reality.

My pain in the head remains more vivid to me than your pain in the head, but if I adjust for this I have to perceive that your hitting me and my hitting you are acts in exactly the same class; I

can't deplore the one without deploring the other; I have weighed them in a balance as accurate as I can make it, found them equally bad, and have thereby set irreversibly out towards social justice.

To my mind, therefore, there was both a logical and a psychological inevitability in basing the claim for the other animals' rights on social justice. I thought there was enough motive force to carry the claim in the fact that we do, for whatever reason, want to appreciate the real world correctly. That is a force that has led people, from time to time, to make considerable and often uncomfortable intellectual adjustments in order to correct for distortions in their own vision. Some humans used to assume that the planet from which we observe the universe must be the centre of the universe – a slight to the sun, which was no doubt well able to bear it, and the source of a distortion in our knowledge of reality which we have now, not without reluctance, corrected for.

I thought that readers of the *Sunday Times*, most of whom I expected to be living in an empire, would have some historical awareness, probably reaching into their own personal intellectual histories, of a long, if spasmodic, series of similar intellectual adjustments which corrected not mere slights to things well able to bear them but actual oppressions of people not able to: I mean the series of corrections to our own vision whereby bit by bit we have withdrawn from the conviction that the centre of the civilised universe is necessarily a white, male, heterosexual Christian with a classical (i.e. western) education and that the people on the periphery, if that is the centre you look from, are the coolie class, to be exploited and kept in their places.

I invoked *The Rights of Man* because it is classically associated with two Revolutions, the French and the American, which were the occasions of quite convulsive adjustment to our vision to correct for the distortions introduced by the class barriers of feudalism and empire.

I invoked *rights*, because rights are a matter of respect and justice, which are constant and can be required of you by force of argument; they are not matters of love, which is capricious and quite involuntary. We are all indebted to Dr. Stephen Clark for translating the tern 'animal lover' into 'zophile'. The full smears implications of 'animal lover' are clear if you compare 'nigger lover', a term that used to be flung at pink people who respected black rights. But even Dr. Clark has been able only to re-clothe us in the decencies of a learned language. I wish there had been a readily-understood Greek suffix that would imply that I respect animals instead of that I am fond of them. As it happens, I *am* fond of most individuals of most animal species I meet, though since I lead a sedentary urban life it's fairly easy for me to avoid meeting the ones I'm likely not to like. But I trust that my refusal to harm them wantonly is independent of whether I like them or not, just as I trust that your refusal to do the same to me, even if you were sure of getting away with it, is independent of whether you like me – and indeed, of whether you think you would like the flavour of me roasted.

To me, then, it all looked – and indeed it still looks – straightforward. Once my imagination has embarked me (and it has, and I can't go back on it) on a course of thoughts making for social justice, it inevitably carries me crashing through the class barriers, including speciesism, which may be the last barrier to fall or at least one of the last. What the movement against speciesism asks, in the light of the theory of Evolution, is that the present high barrier between the human and the other animal species should be displaced and re-erected between the animal kingdom and the vegetable kingdom (though evolutionists will expect there to be a no-man's-land at the border). A millennium from now, there may well be a symposium on the rights of plants. Humans may be working out techniques whereby we could, for instance, derive our food exclusively from fruits, which display as it were a biological acquiescence about falling off into the hands of grasping individuals like ourselves. Plants are individuals, they are sensitive, and they certainly demonstrate an instinctual will to live – that is, they assert in instinctual terms a right to live. But their sensibility and individuality are not carried on by means of a central nervous system, and at the moment that is a place where our knowledge stops and seems to be an intellectually respectable place for our imaginations (at least in practice) to stop.

When I make a central (or at least some sort of organised) nervous system the sticking point, I am not of course making pain the sole delimiting factor of an animal's rights, including a human animal's rights. I do not for an instant admit your right to kill me provided you do it by creeping up on me and contriving not to give me pain or fear. I think what I think is that, providing it isn't threatening our life, we have no right to extinguish an individuality that has been formed by negotiating the world by the agency of a nervous system.

I should add, by the way, that if I have become permanently incapable of pursuing my individuality by the usual agencies you will do me (or what remains of me) a kindness if you extinguish me. Euthanasia is the sole instance in which we behave better to the other animals than to our own species.

In all this straightforwardness, as it seems to me, there is a small hiccup. I have called it, in my title for this afternoon, 'The Darwinist's Dilemma', but that may be too grand a name: it may be merely a Darwinist's conundrum.

The conundrum goes like this. If we abolish the barrier between humans and the other animal species, what we institute is a sort of egalitarianism between all the species of the animal kingdom. The term 'higher animals', which used to be applied not, where it would have been quite sensible, to giraffes but to the primates and some of the other large mammals, turns out to be another distortion induced by our anthropocentric point of view: by 'higher' we just meant 'more like us'. Even if we can show that some animals have a more complex physiological organisation than others, we haven't, I think, hit on any really justified sense for 'lower' and 'higher', especially since we increasingly find out that some of the apparently simpler animals may

be extremely complex in the organisation of their ecological relationships or, as in the case of some of the insects, their social relationships.

We are left recognising that some species are, of course, closer kin to us than others. We may be able to tell that some are better adapted than others to their particular environmental niche. (How much longer *we* shall be able to go on claiming to be well adapted to ours seems in doubt.) By and large we no longer see a hierarchy of animal species but only different types and different degrees of specialisation, including specialisation in flexibility. When I spoke just now of ‘the animal kingdom’, I was being old fashioned. I should have said ‘the Animal Federal Republic’.

I used to be confident that I was, by virtue of my species, at least more intelligent than, say, a pigeon. But (especially since I began giving peanuts regularly to a group of pigeons outside my kitchen window) I have realised that, from an intelligence test that had been set by a pigeon, I should emerge as a simpleton. True, I might want to disparage the very idea of an intelligence test, which I do not think would cross a pigeon’s mind. I can argue that that shows a higher organisation of intellectual curiosity in me than in pigeons. Even so it is, of course, higher only in terms of my logic, which I have by cultural transmission from Aristotle, not in terms of pigeon logic. I contemplate my visiting pigeons and I see that, at least if I’ve given them enough peanuts, they show not a sign of being driven by the puritan work ethic; they sit on their branch completely, so far as I can detect, unanxious about whether they are frittering away their lives; and I am obliged to concede that, if intelligence includes wisdom (and heaven help us all if it doesn’t), I may well be infinitely less intelligent than even the stupidest pigeon.

However, when I feed the pigeons, I shut my cat out of the room. This is a small infringement of his rights, imposed on him by me by main force. I think it is justified, in the interest of the pigeons’ rights, because if I didn’t he would surely have one of my plump, peanut-fed pigeons for his lunch.

If I lunched on a pigeon, I should think myself immoral. If you do so, I must in honesty say I think you immoral. But I don’t think my cat immoral. I think him amoral. The whole dimension of morality doesn’t apply to him, or scarcely applies to him.

Here then is the conundrum. Am I setting up my species as morally superior to the cat species? Am I condescending to my cat? Have I torn down the old class barrier only to rebuild it in moral terms?

If I have, I don’t think, incidentally, that I have done ill. The old concept of human superiority used to say ‘We have a more highly organised technical intelligence than any other animals and this justifies us in inflicting on any animal any atrocity our techniques can devise in pursuit of our superior intellectual curiosity or even in pursuit of mere intellectual relaxation.’ If I now consider myself morally superior to my cat, this at least obliges me to offer him a much gentler message, and it is: ‘precisely because I am morally superior to you, I shall not treat either you or a pigeon as unkindly as you treat pigeons.’

When one is talking about domesticated cats and semi-domesticated pigeons, this is, as I said, merely a conundrum. When one talks about untouched jungle, perhaps the answer is simple: the jungle is the amoral world of other animals, and our only moral obligation to it is to keep out. This in itself implies that we have already moved in on enough of the earth's surface to serve our own needs; and in fact there isn't much untouched jungle left. We have interfered, often importing havoc, and we now sometimes feel a responsibility to redress some of the damage we have done. At this point, writ large, the conundrum becomes a genuine moral problem which asks 'Are we humans justified in intervening to save, for example, tigers from the extinction that now threatens them as a species, given that the preservation of one individual tiger necessarily means the premature extinction of a large number of harmless vegetarian, ruminant individuals whom the tiger will inevitably prey on?'

Apart from this dilemma, to which I do not know the solution, the matter this symposium is discussing still looks straightforward to me. However, I must now say that there are people to whom, I believe, it looks perhaps equally straightforward but quite, quite different. Where I proceed, like a hurdler, over one class barrier after another towards, I think, social justice, they leap at once to an intense love for all living things and an intense personal relationship to some god or numinous entity. Instead of devising moral scales, they consult holy writ. Often they believe this delivers them from the subjectivism and proneness to error of making one's own judgments, though of course it doesn't, since they have to take it on themselves to judge which writ *is* the holy one. If there are any rational, secularist zoophiles or opponents of speciesism within earshot today, I want to be overheard saying this: we are engaged in the revolutionary enterprise of demolishing a class barrier; many of the normal mechanisms for changing things are denied us, but two are not, namely forming a popular front and raising the political consciousness of the citizens (which in this case means raising consciousness of the fact that animals are individuals and have rights); and in our struggle there are real lives to be saved.

According to Malvolio, it was the opinion of Pythagoras that the soul of our grandam might inhabit a wild fowl. I think and shall continue to say that I think that that opinion is a delusion. But if that is your reason for not shooting wild fowl, that is at least one palpable wild fowl saved, you and I are allies, and we have won a victory. It is important that those of us who think they know better should not cut themselves off from those who do well.

Among those who do well my first obeisance must be to Lady Dowding. Lady Dowding is the person who has provided practical alternatives to conniving at atrocities. She has brought into being an organisation<sup>3</sup> for providing alternative cosmetics and alternative clothes. She has brought into being a fund for financing non-atrocity experimentation,<sup>4</sup> thereby providing an alternative to the huge quantities of private and state capital that exert such a pull towards the perpetuation of atrocities. She is not the only but the main engine that drives the National Anti-Vivisection Society about its patient work of identifying and harnessing zoophiles among the

people who possess actual political power and influence, and its patient and horrifying task of monitoring the atrocities of humans and their hypocrisies, like the recent hypocrisy of Amnesty [International], which pursued its campaign against torture by applying, albeit under anaesthetic, the mechanisms of torture to pigs.

Some of Lady Dowding's beliefs are, in my eyes, airy fairy. She probably thinks mine, though she is too nice to make a point of it, crassly materialist. But I do not want to leave it unremarked that in the material, practical, down-to-earth, workaday world Lady Dowding has done a hundred times more actual good than I have achieved with what you might call my airy fairy materialism.

I want also, for the same reason, to praise some people of a very different type, the freedom fighters of the animal movement. Here I must adduce a novel by Maureen Duffy called, after Chekov, *I Want to Go to Moscow*. I do so without shame, despite the fact that Maureen Duffy is a friend and colleague of mine; I would like in any case to commend to you a fine work of the imagination that is also a very exciting quasi-thriller; but its particular relevance is that, having been published in 1973, it proved to have anticipated, in the way that art tends to do, several events that later really happened.

This is achieved not through clairvoyance but because it follows out, in artistic terms, the logic of a problem that vexes many minds, including mine, namely whether it is good to break bad laws. Socrates went to his death in obedience to the laws, on the argument that, in a democracy, you are free to try to persuade your fellow citizens to change the laws, and if you fail to persuade them then you must obey the laws as they are, even if it costs you your life. However, Socrates was dicing only with his own life. The moral question bites even harder when it is other lives that are in question. If you can say that some orders are so bad that a soldier can't be excused for executing them on the grounds that he was only obeying orders, then it may be that there are some laws so bad that one has a positive moral obligation to break them. Obviously I am thinking of the laws imposed on Occupied Europe during the 1939–45 war that obliged gentiles to turn in escaped Jews to the authorities; or the North American laws during the last century that said you must return a runaway slave to the man who considered the slave his property; or the present law of this land that says you must not steal a dog from (or if you do steal, you must give back to) the man who considers the dog his property and proposes to experiment on him.

For my own law-abiding conduct I can produce several rationalisations, some of which may even be true, to the effect that I have other responsibilities as well or that perhaps I can be more useful from behind the façade of being a respectable person. But I suspect that the crucial reason why I am not in prison at this moment is that I am a coward. The argument I take most seriously is that, if one breaks a bad law, one has given tacit moral approval to other people who may break good laws (which they of course will see as bad); and perhaps one is giving not only tacit moral approval but actual incitement, a thing one should be very, very careful about doing if the

beings one is trying to protect are hostages or are so vulnerable that they can easily become victims in the hands of the people one may be provoking. Even, however, if one is finally convinced by that argument, it behoves a coward like me to remember constantly that the pro-animal movement has its front line, as well as its think-tanks and secretariats and supply lines, and that at the front line animal lives are saved and human freedoms are, very bravely, risked.

One must always beware of drawing statistical conclusions from too small a sample. What I want to say next (and last) may well be subject to a distortion in my vision resulting from the accidents of my personal point of observation. When I became a vegetarian I don't think I had knowingly ever met a fellow vegetarian. My husband was a carnivore and our daughter was brought up a carnivore: not because I lack the conviction to try to convert others to my convictions but because I am scrupulous about exerting emotional blackmail on the people, who number very few, over whom I have the power to do so. Now my daughter is a vegetarian, not through my influence, and my husband is a vegetarian, partly through the influence of our now grown-up daughter, who had few scruples about exerting emotional blackmail; and I have several vegetarian friends among my fellow writers (Maureen Duffy, David Fletcher, Shena Mackay, Patricia Highsmith, Colin Spencer), all of whom I met not through the pro-animal movement but in what appears to be a statistically neutral way, namely through the exercise of our common profession of literature. It may not be genuinely neutral, of course, because literature tends to attract imaginative people. Yet even when I have made a few corrections of that kind, it still appears to me that, since, for example, 1965, when I wrote an article on the rights of animals (which I didn't by the way, call 'The Rights of Non-Human Animals' because to me there is a necessary continuity between the rights of all animals, as animals, including human animals in with the others), we have begun to assemble the wavery outline of a popular front composed of rationalists, spiritualists and freedom fighters, and we are in a position to offer ourselves and each other a very small amount of encouragement, perhaps in the words, again from Chekov in translation, that Maureen Duffy made the epigraph of one section of *I Want to Go to Moscow*: '... later on, others like you will come, perhaps six of them, then twelve, and so on, until at last your sort will be in a majority.'

*Brigid Brophy, writer and campaigner (1929–1995), was admired and feared for her formidable intellect. She pioneered debate about animal rights both in essays and in her prize-winning novel Hackenfeller's Ape (1954). An atheist, vegetarian (latterly vegan) and socialist, she espoused sexual freedom, a theme much explored in her work. She married the art historian Michael Levey, whose support during her fight to achieve Public Lending Right for authors was invaluable.*

## Notes

1 This text was originally given as a paper at the RSPCA symposium held at Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1977, and published in Paterson & Ryder 1979. It is reproduced here with the kind permission of Kate Levey and the publisher.

- 2 'The Rights of Animals', *Sunday Times*, 10 October. Also published in Brophy 1989.
- 3 Beauty Without Cruelty.
- 4 The Lord Dowding Fund; <http://www.ldf.org.uk>.

### **References**

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