

# COMPASSION WITHOUT LIMITS

One of the world's leading animal rights activists, HENRY SPIRA, has been active in the animal liberation arena in the US for 15 years. He and the Animal Rights International Coalitions of which he is Co-ordinator, have confronted animal users head-on and have achieved substantial successes.

For instance, a campaign to stop the American Museum of Natural History's 20 years of deliberately mutilating cats so as to observe their sexual performance, convinced the public that the experiments were a crude and ineffectual perversion of science. The cruelty was eventually stopped.

The first Animal Rights International Coalition was formed to fight the specific issues of the Draize and LD 50 tests. Now they are moving into the wider area of factory farming with the Coalition for Nonviolent Food.

## Henry Spira

*We cannot be selective about whom we defend from being dominated, experimented upon, confined, or butchered for dinner.*

Today we have particularly good reason to be concerned with the violence humans inflict on humans. But should those of us who care about the violence inflicted on humans care about the violence inflicted on animals? In my own mind, the need for a consistent ethic of non-violence for both human and non-human animals is obvious -- one is an extension of the other.

But many people when thinking of violence to animals may just conjure up a gun-toting trophy hunter or a sadistic psychopath torturing a cat or a dog. Yet to limit one's vision to these dramatic but occasional acts of violence is to miss the point. The real, massive violence is part of the structure of our culture -- animals are considered laboratory tools and edibles. Every year, in the USA alone, tens of millions of animals suffer in laboratory prisons and more than six billion farm animals suffer violence on their way to the dinner table.

This violence is mostly invisible. It has society's seal of approval, and is rationalized by a culture with an appetite, if not outright addiction, for the taste of flesh.

The simple fact that we eat animals dominates our attitude towards them. Society does not want to be uncomfortable with the injustices woven into its fabric and therefore attempts to create an unbridgeable gap between ourselves and other animal species.

Many societies promote the concept that we should dominate other animals. It is a philosophy of competition rather than interdependence: a defense of exploitation rather than a desire to live in harmony with the rest of nature. Tradition also promotes the anthropocentric view that humans are defined by their differences from, rather than their similarities with, other animals.

Two centuries ago, most intellectuals believed that animals were automatons incapable of feeling pain as humans experience it. They used this reasoning to justify the cruelest experiments, ignoring the screams of their victims. The late Nobel Laureate Isaac Bashevis Singer observed, "Various philosophers and religious leaders tried to convince their disciples and followers that animals are nothing more than machines without a soul, without feelings. How-

ever, anyone who has ever lived with an animal -- be it a dog, a bird or even a mouse -- knows that this theory is a brazen lie, invented to justify cruelty."

Today, science and common sense suggest that humans and other animals are not separated by an unbridgeable gulf. There is an overlap of mental abilities, capacity for rational thought, an ability to communicate, and concern for others. There are shared feelings. And like us, other animals want to get a little pleasure out of life.

As far back as 1789, Jeremy Bentham summed it all up: "The question is not, Can they reason? nor Can they talk, but, Can they suffer?" And when it comes to suffering, what relevant difference is there between us and other animals? What gives us the right to violate the bodies and minds of other feeling beings? Unless we subscribe to the concept of tyranny, that might makes right, there is no way to justify harming other species.

In their recent book, **Animal Rights Crusade** authors James M. Jasper and Dorothy Nelkin suggest

that this "powerful social movement (is) driven by a simple moral position: animals are similar enough to humans to deserve serious moral consideration. They are sentient beings, entitled to dignified lives, and they should be treated as ends, not as means. Protestors ask how we can love our pets, yet experiment on identical animals in laboratories: how we can cuddle one animal yet eat another."

The reason we are able to cuddle one animal while acquiescing to violence against billions of other animals is that, without any effort, we can distance ourselves from the violence.

If animals were vivisected and slaughtered in the city square behind glass walls, we would doubtless be outraged and begin to change our eating habits and research priorities. The same would be true if we had to kill the animals we eat.

But the violence inflicted against animals takes place behind closed doors, so that meat eaters are spared the screams of their dinner and don't have to look him or her in the eye. And laboratory animals are kept out of sight, imprisoned behind steel gates as they are driven insane, burned, radiated, starved, blinded, bashed, poisoned and electroshocked.

The pig, the veal calf, the chicken are violated without pause throughout their entire existence. It is a violation of mind and body. Stress and insanity are a standard part of this man-made hell called factory farming. There is no escape and there

are no survivors. Meat is murder and there is no emergency hot-line, no help for the battered victims.

The baby calf is separated from his mother at birth to be boarded up in crates so narrow he can't even turn around. The only reason he is able to stay alive for his allotted sixteen weeks is because of the drugs pumped into him. When taken to slaughter, he is often so ill and weak that he must be dragged along the floor.

In vast egg laying factories, hens live out their lives in a space smaller than this page, so immobilized that their feet grow around the wire mesh floor of their cages.

If we did to our companion animals what is done to dinner animals, they'd lock us up and headline it in the news. The accused would be labeled a psychopath, mentally disturbed. Yet the pain of a dog, cat, pig, calf, chicken is the same. We are shocked by violence against infants and the elderly because they are defenseless. Non-human animals are in that same vulnerable class.

In the epilogue for *In Defense of Animals*, philosopher Peter Singer challenges the notion that only humans matter: "(Some claim that) our own species must come first. But why should we accept this claim? Only 200 years ago, it might have seemed just as contrary to human nature for us to take great care for the interests of other races. When I see myself as one among others, the relevant point of the comparison is that others also have feelings, others can also suffer or be happy. Any

being capable of feeling anything, whether pain or pleasure or any kind of positive or negative state of consciousness, must therefore count."

We cannot be selective about whom we defend from being dominated, experimented upon, confined, or butchered for dinner. As British writer Brigid Brophy notes, "the exploitation of the other animal species by the human animal species is the most unscrupulous, the most cruel, the most nearly universal and the longest-lasting exploitation of one class by another class in the history of the world. And the pattern of mental blind spots that allows us to do it is a pattern very easily adaptable to any other of the (fashionable) tyrannies....."

Some argue that there's a limit to our compassion, that we can only relate to a limited amount of violence. But compassion is never limiting. On the contrary, compassion feeds on itself, -- the more we practise it in our lifestyle, the more of it we have to use. Conversely, the more we accept violence, the more injured we become to it.

And countering violence to animals is an issue close to home, as are the solutions. Eating with conscience, shifting to a meatless or less-meat-dependent diet is not only a powerful weapon in the war against violence, it is an easy passive step, a move which can make all the difference for the animals while improving our own well-being.

The issue of consistency is best summed up by Albert Schweitzer: "Ethics in our Western world has been largely limited ..... We need a boundless ethic which will include the animals also."

*"In their behaviour toward creatures, all men were Nazis. The smugness with which man could do with other species as he pleased exemplified the most extreme racist theories, the principle that might is right."*

*— Isaac Bashevis Singer,  
Enemies: A Love Story*