

A Philosophic Basis for the Animal Rights Movement

Or, if you thought animal rights is like a religion,
you are closer to correct than you realize

By Tim Stoffel

While laid up sick in bed, I took it upon myself to start reading some of the works of the great Christian philosopher Francis A. Schaeffer. In his first two books, *The God Who Is There* and *Escape From Reason*, Schaeffer lays out the philosophical underpinnings of many of the moral and spiritual worldviews that are in use today. Although his application of these principles was in an overtly Christian context, a number of things stood out to me that have immediate application in understanding the animal rights movement, and why it has become 'religiously radical'.

Even if you are not a believer in the Christian faith, I urge you to read this with an open mind, as the events described here take place in a society that had long been deeply influenced by social principles and norms derived from Christianity. You may be able to see that Christianity is not the only religion that these 'new' philosophical ideas have altered. And for those of you who are familiar with these philosophies, you will see that I have greatly simplified them to avoid inundating the reader with a lot of complex details.

To begin this journey, we must travel back to the early part of the late Middle Ages. Up to this time, a strong Christian religious belief permeated society. So strong was this belief system that everything was affected by it-- art, culture, philosophy, and people's everyday life. Although it could be said that your religious beliefs should thoroughly permeate you as an individual, it could be argued at this time, that the Church had gone too far. So powerful was the influence of this belief system that art of that period had grotesquely distorted proportions to represent 'holy' and 'less than holy'. Even the 'holy' entities were represented more-or-less symbolically.

The theologian Thomas Aquinas saw things differently. He saw that in the process of emphasizing the Holy entities, much of creation was in effect, being ignored. So, he suggested a new philosophy that put more emphasis on the natural world. After all, that too, was God's handiwork. Little did Aquinas realize that he was actually planting the seeds of the Renaissance.

From the time of Aquinas until the Renaissance, this interest in nature (and man) continued to grow until it balanced out, or perhaps more than balanced out the influence of the church. People started enjoying nature for its own sake and beauty.

Although this 'return to nature' heavily influenced philosophy, the Christian values of 'absolutes' continued to be the main controlling factor. This principle of absolutes (If X is right, then the opposite of X must be wrong) was so ingrained that one even gave a serious thought that there may be another way to look at truth.

This all started to change in the late 1800's. An alternate philosophy, one not based on absolutes was

hinted at by Immanuel Kant, and then developed by the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Frederic Hegel. This philosophy was instead based on coming up with a new idea by considering the merits of an old idea and its opposite. This new idea in turn became the basis for another round of comparisons. Thus, the whole system had no real absolute reference, but gradually built on its own thought. This kind of philosophical thinking is sometimes called a 'dialectic'. This idea of a dialectic was the biggest change in philosophy to happen in 2,000 years.

As a result of a loss of an absolute frame of reference, a number of new ideas started to emerge from philosophers. These ideas would go on to have a profound effect on our world, as we shall see a bit later. These ideas included:

NO ABSOLUTES – This is the underpinning idea of the whole dialectic concept. Since there was no longer an absolute frame of reference, there were no ideas or activities that were absolutely wrong-- or absolutely right, either.

NO GOOD OR EVIL – As an important extension of the idea of 'no absolutes', there was no real distinction between good and evil, either. Thus a murderer, for instance, would be on the same philosophical footing as their victim.

A DEVALUATION OF MAN – One of the surprising outcomes of this new thinking was a view that mankind is nothing special in this world. Man could be no more or less important than a rock, a plant or an animal.

A SENSE OF HOPELESSNESS – People found that these ideas, although they seemed to give them a lot more freedom in how they could act, were utterly devoid of hope. Despite this, people were reluctant to give up this new freedom, simply because they were free of restraint. Instead, they would try things that were farther and farther from the old social norm to try and find some sort of meaning to life. This would eventually lead to the use of drugs, etc.

A UNIFORM CULTURE – Cultural norms were shifted by this new philosophy to the end that culture would become uniform-- everyone would hold the same views on every subject. This can also result in a suppression of freedom of expression. Maybe this is one of the reasons that some modern liberals, in discussing their ideas with others, cannot figure out why other people do not automatically agree with them.

A LOSS OF MEANING – Because of the loss of absolutism, 'absolute' concepts started to become shells of their former self. Many terms used in religion that had deep meaning previously were manipulated to have any meaning (or no meaning) the philosopher wanted to assign to them. Yet, the words continue to be used because they tend to attract attention. Many, if not most people at least vaguely understand what they used to mean.

The astute reader may already recognize where these thought patterns are leading us.

At first, this thought pattern remained with the company of philosophers. But with philosophy being the basis of the arts, it started to show up in art, especially painting. The impressionist movement, and what follows is the first place where average people began to be exposed to these new philosophies. Painters like Van Gogh and Picasso were heavily influenced by these ideas. It was also about this time that there started to be an interest in some facets of society in enhancing animal welfare, an idea that up to that time had not been given much thought. (The urbanization of America was not helping matters, either.)

About this time, another important philosophical branch of our society began to be affected by this concept of a dialectic, the government. Among the most philosophical of our government is the legal system, and it was here that we can really see a major shift in thinking. Starting sometime early in this century, the courts shifted away from the classic ideas of 'right and wrong' and started to move towards the concept of 'precedent'. With no absolute standard to return to, a bad court decision in the wrong place at the wrong time could set a 'precedent' that future judges would follow almost lock-step. When an idea like this was finally exposed for what it really is, the precedent could be overturned and a new precedent set. You can see how this would set the entire legal system 'adrift' to reflect changing values, rather than the fundamental values laid down by our founding fathers.

From painting and literature, this idea of a dialectic started to influence music, resulting in our often distressing modern art music. Visual arts were affected next, and these principles are easily seen in many of today's films. Especially in the films the film critics love the most! (The critics, too have been influenced by the 'new dialectic'.)

Finally, this thought pattern returned to the church. Surprisingly, there was little resistance to it, because it tended to create a church that was more 'human', or 'humane' if you please. The concept of a God with fixed moral standards came to be replaced by a God who was more interested in the human condition, whatever that may be. Like the legal system, thought in the church soon 'went adrift'. Ideas that were considered abominations a few decades back were now welcome with open arms. This shift would end up being important to the animal rights movement.

Little by little this new thought process soon permeated society as we know it. The devaluing of human life has brought with it some really terrible things. The holocaust, and all the 'ethnic cleansings' that have followed are good examples. So is the concept of abortion on demand. (There have been some steps forwards during this time as well, such as the civil rights movement.)

As the years went by, this devaluing of human life had an interesting anti-parallel-- a revaluing of nature in general, and for the purpose of this discussion, animals. This was helped greatly by a growing realization that were systematically destroying the earth.

Although the damage to the earth's ecosystems is clearly shown by reasonably objective science, the message has not reached as far as it should. More importantly, in the eyes of a few, it falls far short of reaching the people of the world. So, from this you start to see the emergence of the environmental movement. Although there are many legitimate groups working to improve environmental awareness, there is a minority that have taken a militant stand on these issues. These people are the ones that have bought into the 'new dialectic' idea entirely. A subset of this movement, but one that is a bit separate from the environmental movement is animal rights. Animal rights is an outgrowth of a legitimate concern for animal welfare, just as the environmental extremists are an outgrowth of groups generally

promoting environmental awareness.

In 1954, a new animal welfare group formed, called the Humane Society of the United States, or HSUS for short. Its founders were leaders from the church. Some of these people were from the new, 'more humane' churches where the traditional views on owning and using animals had begun to 'drift', just as had everything else touched by the principle of the 'new dialectic'. Like any of these sorts of things, there were some areas of our society that clearly needed to treat animals more humanely, and this gave the new HSUS purpose.

But starting about 1980, there was a sharp shift in the thinking of the HSUS. Instead of promoting animal welfare, they started to promote animal rights. This happened about the time that other animal rights groups were starting to become prominent. Chief among them is the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), and the Animal Protection Institute (API). (There are many others now.) Animal rights falls right down the lines of the 'new philosophy of dialectic'. It equates man on a par with, or even below animals-- mankind has been devalued. Most of these groups are not afraid to twist the truth to their own end when they need to. This shows a departure from the absolutism that prevailed before. To them the truth is 'whatever is convenient for the cause at the moment'. It started to use religious terminology in an overtly perverted way. A good example of this is PETA claiming that 'Jesus was a vegetarian', even though the bible clearly shows that He was not a vegetarian. Thus, they have devalued the meaning of the religious name/term 'Jesus'.

Last but not least, the concept that there is no difference between good and evil is really beginning to permeate the animal rights movement. A segment of these people have gone so far to believe that any action is justified in the furtherance of their cause. This typified by the Animal Liberation Front (ALF) and the closely related environmental group the Earth Liberation Front (ELF). These groups believe that violence is justified in promoting their cause. So far is their slide into the new dialectic, that some of these groups vociferously protested a new law making such violence illegal, believing that had a right to use violence to promote their cause. And as time goes by, they are edging closer and closer to really heinous crimes, and have recently started to directly threaten people's lives.

So as you can see, the animal rights movement is a dangerous mix of thought and twisted religious principles. They have lost the ability to truly discern what is right or wrong, replacing it with their own concept of 'right' and 'wrong'. When they make statements like Ingrid Newkirk did equating a rat with a human, you can see how far into the new dialectic their thinking has gone. The fervor that these groups pursue their ideas can only be described as a 'religious fervor'. Some people may choose to use the term 'Jihad' or 'cult'. Many of the animal rights groups meet the current definition of a 'religion' rather nicely.

So, in lieu of the small likelihood of society returning to its absolutist philosophic roots, there is a real need to see the animal rights people recognized as a new religion. And as a religion, they have to conform to the legal standards of a religion to be able to 'play' in this society. These are the same rules (which descend from the new dialectic) that limit how much influence the Christian church or any other religious entity can have on influencing or shaping our laws. In the end, this may be the only thing that will stop the animal rights movement from their relentless march to rid society of animals.

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