

Although the Editorials section is usually reserved for the editors and the Comment section is devoted to the views of other contributors, there is a slightly different arrangement in this issue. An editorial by Michael W. Fox is followed by a reply from Jim Mason, author of the Comment article entitled "The Politics of Animal Rights: Making the Human Connection," which appeared in our May/June 1981 issue. Because Mr. Mason's piece is an invited response to Dr. Fox's editorial, we felt that it would be most effective and truest to the goal of the Journal to promote dialogue if we presented them together. — Ed.

Animal Welfare, Rights and 'Liberation'

Michael W. Fox

A distinction which is more than mere semantics needs to be made between certain philosophical and political trends in the humane movement. The historical basis of the movement is founded upon the morality of promoting kindness toward all creatures: reverence for all life. This approach has been strengthened by the integration of ecological, or eco-ethical principles and by the emerging interdisciplinary science of animal welfare. Furthermore, the movement has been enriched by the scholarship of moral philosophy, including the limited but useful concept of animal 'rights.'

This concept is useful because it focuses attention upon animals' interests (social, emotional, behavioral and other needs) instead of upon perceived cruelty and the wrongdoer. This latter moralistic approach, which at best, helps to clarify our moral obligations toward animals, at worst appears as a judgment against those who exploit animals. This puts people—farmers, scientists and others—on the defensive and fails to establish the common ground vital to the process of reform. Addressing our moral obligation to treat animals humanely and to cater to their basic needs, shifts the focus to where it should be: upon the animal.

Animal rights philosophy, properly articulated, can also help in this regard, but not when it is presented in an absolute or idealistic way. For example, while we have a moral obligation to treat all creatures humanely, and while it may be argued that they have a natural right to humane treatment, it should be made quite clear that not all rights are absolute. The right to life is clearly not an absolute. If it were, and society accepted it as such, then animal shelters would be swamped with surplus cats and dogs, and society could not afford to house and feed them for the rest of their lives. Similarly, the postulation of an absolute right not to be eaten is unrealistic and, at this time in history, counterproductive. Promoting vegetarianism on the sole basis that animals have a right not to be eaten will not aid communication with producers and others involved in the livestock industry, or with hunters and fishermen. (Also, animal suffering is sometimes unavoidable, but morally justified, in at least a few research studies which are of over-riding, direct benefit to both humans and nonhumans.)

Vegetarianism has nothing directly to do with how farm livestock are treated: look at the plight of livestock in vegetarian India for example. In many parts of the world, raising livestock is an essential part of ecologically sound food production. Global vegetarianism could be ecologically disastrous. The case for farm animal welfare is weakened and clouded when vegetarianism is brought in. However, used selectively, the injunctions not to eat meat (or to reduce one's intake considerably) may be an effective strategy with considerable economic and ecological validity, especially in the United States.

I see the animal liberation front, with its abolitionist posture and idealistic distortion of animal rights philosophy (e.g., animals have a right not to be eaten) as a potentially counterproductive element in the animal welfare movement. Actions of

confrontation such as raids on research laboratories, letting confined farm animals loose and 'eco-guerilla' tactics to stop hunters, sealers and whalers are effective in gaining public awareness and sympathy, but public ridicule will follow if such activities are not followed up with dialogue between opposing factions and the setting of *realistic* goals. Confrontation alone is usually the result of political frustration, but by itself, it can be anarchy.

The animal liberation front is, in many respects, not unlike the Victorian antivivisection movement. It has a definite role in the overall dynamics of social change and consciousness raising. But animal liberationists may be tarred with the same brush of anarchy as other extreme factions that are polarizing Western society today, such as the neo-Fascists, the 'moral majority,' disaffected labor and staunch pro-lifers. However, this is not necessarily the only fate for the movement. Henry Spira has demonstrated that carefully orchestrated militant action combined with cooperative ventures with the more moderate animal welfare organizations which still maintain contact with the establishment power centers can be very effective.

It is unfortunate that animal 'rights' philosophy has become associated with the militant animal liberation forces because, as Mahatma Ghandi showed, the firm foundation provided by ethics and moral philosophy can give great strength to a social cause based on nonviolent civil disobedience. Also, the goals of the movement must be based in reality and should not concentrate on idealistic hopes that cannot be accomplished in a time frame reasonable for the human animal. Goals such as the abolition of the killing of animals or the use of animals in research are not attainable in the next decade although these ideals may some day come to fruition. There is a difference between unbridled idealism and practicality. The latter is more socially effective and hence, more expedient. The former often leads to militant enthusiasm, which is difficult to sustain without charismatic leaders and public demonstrations, and it may end in violence when enthusiasm is replaced with frustration caused by a more entrenched and less communicative opposition.

So let us keep our 'isms,' our personal beliefs and ideals, such as vegetarianism and antivivisectionism, in proper perspective, and get on with the business that concerns us all in the humane movement proper—namely, animal welfare and humane ethics.