The Language of Animal Exploitation

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A detailed, cross-cultural linguistic analysis of terminology related to various forms of animal exploitation might give considerable insight into how professional and vested interest groups perceive and value animals and how sensitive they are about what they do. Dairy cattle, breeding sows, and laying hens have been called "production units" and "biomachines." These are examples of how language can be laundered to assuage guilt, gain public respectability, or avoid public ridicule. There are myriad other examples. Unwanted cats and dogs are "put to sleep," rather than killed; surplus pets are euthanized (which means mercy killing), rather than depopulated. Seals, deer, and other wildlife are "harvested" (as if they were apples) rather than slaughtered. Recently, farm groups have voiced their distress about the idea, advanced by some humane education groups, that we eat animals. They do not find this concept palatable, especially when addressed to children, and would prefer to see us talk of "eating meat." It is true that we do not consume whole animals—but meat *does* come from whole animals!

Scientists often use the term "sacrifice" in place of "kill" when speaking of laboratory animals. This usage represents a significant choice of terms, since it implies that the animals are dying for human benefit, or for the sake of the advancement of knowledge. I find the word "pet" demeaning when speaking of companion animals like cats and dogs, and animals that are denominated by the sterile term "specimens" by zoologists and naturalists can hardly be perceived as more than objects or things. Animals, even though they, like us, have gender, are rarely referred to as "she" or "he" but as "it." They are also deanimalized further by the use of such pronouns as "that," rather than "who" or "whom." Also, teachers of English, writers, journalists, and others could help by banishing from our vocabulary the demeaning inferences made about animals when they are used in reference to essentially human traits and shortcomings: *e.g.*, "pig," "swine," "sloth," "bitch."

The hypothesis that our language serves not only to distance us from animals, but also tends to reduce them to the level of insensitive objects, deserves testing. Such language also conveys an aura of respectability to ethically questionable forms of animal exploitation, and even sanctifies some forms, as in the "sacrifice" of laboratory animals.