

JUSTICE FOR ALL: INCLUDING ANIMAL RIGHTS IN SOCIAL JUSTICE ACTIVISM

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I. INTRODUCTION

The day the men took Sasha away from her mother, she was only three weeks old. A few months later, they took her to the cage where she would spend the rest of her life. This was “home:” a prison of concrete and metal. No sunshine, no space to turn around, and nothing to do. Even though she had just hit puberty, they forced her to get pregnant. It went on that way until the end, Sasha forced to give birth over and over until her body could not take it anymore.

After years of confinement and abuse, on her final day of life, Sasha was packed in a pen with dozens of others in preparation for the slaughter. Even though they were about to be killed, I believe the worst was over for most of them. No more boredom and no more pain. But the worst was not over for Sasha. One by one, they were pulled out until there was nobody left but her. She ran back and forth, and then in circles, screaming. She struggled to lift the gate off its hinges but it was no use. And then it was over. She died alone. She died because she was no longer useful.

In spite of the horrors that Sasha endured during her life, perhaps the most tragic part of Sasha’s story is what happened after her death. It happened while I was working as a legal intern in one of the world’s largest human rights organizations. I was sitting in the cafeteria, surrounded by pioneers of social

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justice, people who have dedicated their entire lives to fighting oppression and standing up for the marginalized. To my right was a criminal justice reformer who has saved thousands of children from languishing in jail cells. To my left was a fearless advocate who ensures that gender violence is taken seriously at the highest levels of international law.

But something was not right. Because I knew that right in the middle of the room, there she was. Sasha. Dismembered and mutilated beyond recognition. Her life, her death, her suffering, all ignored. And there they were, these champions of justice, casually eating the body parts of someone who did not want to die. Sasha was condemned to a life of suffering and an early death because she was born as a member of the wrong species, because she was a pig, and because she was different.

This article seeks to show that Sasha's story is not just a story about cruelty or neglect but a story of injustice. This article argues we, as social justice advocates, fail to live up to our principles until we stand up for Sasha and embrace animal rights as a fundamental part of our activism. This article first identifies three fundamental social justice values and how these values apply to animal rights, and second, it elaborates on what it would mean for us to embrace animal rights as a core component of social justice.

II. SOCIAL JUSTICE PRINCIPLES AND ANIMAL RIGHTS

Before arguing that animal rights is a social justice issue, one must first identify the core principles of social justice. This article focus on three particular values that unify social justice activists: (1) an opposition to arbitrary discrimination, (2) support of the marginalized, and (3) a respect for autonomy and individual rights.

A. Opposing Arbitrary Discrimination

The opposition to arbitrary discrimination is one of the most essential values of the social justice movement. Opposing arbitrary discrimination is recognizing the elementary-school maxim "it doesn't matter what you look like, but only who you are on the inside." More precisely, it is recognizing that differences in treatment should be tied to rationally related, morally relevant, characteristics. We see freedom from discrimination articulated across social justice movements (think of Martin Luther King Jr.'s declaration that children should be judged not "by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character,"¹ or the modern LGBT movement rallying cry that marriage rights should be grounded in couples' commitments of love, not their sexual orientation²). Social justice advocates

1. Martin Luther King Jr., *I Have a Dream* 5 (Aug. 28, 1963) (transcript available at <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/i-have-dream-1>).

2. See, e.g., *Marriage 101*, FREEDOM TO MARRY, <http://www.freedomtomarry.org/pages/marriage-101> (last visited August 15, 2015).

recognize that treating someone differently solely because of their race, class, gender, nationality, sexual orientation, or disability is almost always wrong. That is because we know that for almost all decisions, these characteristics are morally irrelevant.

Just like racism, sexism, and classism, speciesism focuses on one morally arbitrary characteristic: species, and uses that to justify violence and inequality. After all, what does a number of chromosomes or an opposable thumb have to do with whether or not someone should live or die?

To be clear, opposing speciesism does not mean that “flies, humans, carrots and pigs” have to be treated the same.³ Similarly, we know that opposing sexism doesn’t mean that cisgender males should get pap smears. That is because the way we treat an individual should be tailored to their wants and needs. For example, carrots do not need exercise but pigs do. Thus, a legal framework that protects the freedom of movement for pigs but not for carrots is not speciesist or otherwise discriminatory. Pigs have very different interests than carrots in this respect, and thus, we should treat them differently.

As Lukas Gloor, a philosophy researcher at the Foundational Research Institute, notes, the point of the objection to speciesism is not that all individuals should be treated the same, but “that the same interests, or interests of the same strength, should be taken into account to the same extent, regardless of the species-membership of the individuals concerned.”⁴ Thus, the fallacy of speciesism occurs when we take identical interests and treat them differently solely based on species-membership. Ultimately, to say that certain individuals should receive privileged treatment “just because they are human” is as morally bankrupt as arguing that certain others are more valuable “just because they are white,” “just because they are male,” or “just because they are heterosexual.” If we are to stay true to our principles, social justice activists cannot rely on such specious (and speciesist) logic; we have to reject speciesism and thereby embrace one of the fundamental tenets of the animal rights movement.

Once we reject speciesism, every justification for the privileged moral status of human beings falls apart. If we are going to send Sasha to her death so she can become our lunch, then we have to identify at least one morally relevant characteristic about her that would justify doing so, but there are none. Historically, humans have invoked rationality, moral reciprocity, artistic talent, and other characteristics to assert their superiority,⁵ but this does not stand up to reason. For example, the ability to paint or solve a puzzle has nothing to do with whether you deserve to live or die. This becomes obvious when we consider that

3. Lukas Gloor, *Why Animals Matter I*, CRUCIAL CONSIDERATIONS (February 5, 2015), <http://crucialconsiderations.org/ethics/why-animals-matter-i/>.

4. *Id.*

5. See generally, *Animal Cognition*, STANFORD ENCYCLOPEDIA OF PHILOSOPHY, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/cognition-animal/> (reviewing the foundational principles of animal cognition and research in the field).

many human beings, such as infants or the cognitively impaired, may lack the capacities that are used to define the extent of this privilege. We recognize that any human being that can think and feel is deserving of basic rights, regardless of whether they can do complex math or bear moral obligations. If we take our opposition to discrimination seriously, we should not deny this same respect to animals.

B. Supporting the Marginalized

Another foundational social justice principle is support for the most severely disadvantaged, and in particular those whose interests are largely disregarded in mainstream discourse.⁶ Nonhuman animals are marginalized on a scale and to a degree that is incomprehensible. Their plight is ignored by society at large. In the United States alone, there are hundreds of millions of egg-laying hens that live their entire lives in a space smaller than a sheet of paper;⁷ there are over 8 billion chickens each year that will likely never feel the grass beneath their feet or see the light of day;⁸ there are 65 million pigs living in concrete dungeons;⁹ and there are over 30 million cows destined for slaughter,¹⁰ a significant fraction of whom will be improperly¹¹ stunned before they are hung upside down, cut, and skinned alive.

6. See generally, Matthew Robinson, *What is Social Justice*, APPALACHIAN STATE UNIVERSITY, <http://gis.appstate.edu/social-justice-and-human-rights/what-social-justice> (defining social justice, including its definition by John Rawls as “taking care of the least advantaged members of society”).

7. There were 290 million hens raised in 2010 and 95% of hens were raised in cages. 80% of the egg producing market follows United Egg Producer guidelines, which seek to set and raise standards for the industry as a whole. UEP guidelines call for the industry to phase in an increase in the space allocated to birds to a range of 67-86 square inches each. A sheet of paper is 93.5 square inches. UNITED EGG PRODUCERS, ANIMAL HUSBANDRY GUIDELINES FOR U.S. EGG LAYING FLOCKS 2, 21 (2010), <http://www.uepcertified.com/pdf/2010-uep-animal-welfare-guidelines.pdf>.

8. “Chickens are raised largely by contract producers who typically confine them indoors in large, warehouse-like ‘row-out’ facilities.” THE HUMANE SOC’Y OF THE U.S., AN HSUS REPORT: THE WELFARE OF ANIMALS IN THE CHICKEN INDUSTRY 1 (2013), http://www.humanesociety.org/assets/pdfs/farm/welfare_broiler.pdf.

9. THE HUMANE SOC’Y OF THE U.S., AN HSUS REPORT: THE WELFARE OF ANIMALS IN THE PIG INDUSTRY, at 1, 3 (2010), http://animalstudiesrepository.org/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1024&context=hsus_reps_impacts_on_animals; PETA, *Pigs: Intelligent Animals Suffering in Farms and Slaughterhouses*, <http://www.peta.org/issues/animals-used-for-food/animals-used-food-factsheets/pigs-intelligent-animals-suffering-factory-farms-slaughterhouses/> (last visited March 1, 2015).

10. *Farm Animal Statistics: Slaughter Totals*, THE HUMANE SOC’Y OF THE U.S., http://www.humanesociety.org/news/resources/research/stats_slaughter_totals.html

11. Because of the time pressures of the work, slaughterhouse works often botch the “stunning” process that is supposed to knock the animal unconscious. This means that thousands of animals are dismembered while fully conscious. Joby Warrick, *They Die Piece By Piece: In Overtaxed Plants, Humane Treatment of Cattle is Often a Battle Lost*, THE WASHINGTON POST, April 10, 2001, at A1, <http://www.abolitionistapproach.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Warrick-They-Die-Piece-by-Piece-2001.pdf>; see also Kimberly Kindy, *Faster Slaughter Line a Slower Death for Poultry?*, THE WASHINGTON POST, October 30, 2013, at A1, http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/usda-plan-to-speed-up-poultry-processing-lines-could-increase-risk-of-bird-abuse/2013/10/29/aeeffe1e-3b2e-11e3-b6a9-da62c264f40e_story.html.

As defenders of the marginalized, social justice advocates must take a stand against this and take action for these animals.

C. *Respecting Autonomy and Individual Rights*

Finally, respect for autonomy is another important principle of the social justice movement that weighs heavily in favor of support for animal rights. This principle plays a crucial role in a number of different social justice causes. For instance, reproductive rights advocates support women in ensuring control over their own bodies¹² and advocates for indigenous communities stand up for the right of self-determination.¹³ If social justice means opposition to the violation of autonomy, then we should oppose the human domination over the lives of nonhuman animals. If we truly respect autonomy, then we must take a stand against the way that society seeks to control the bodies of nonhuman animals.

III. HOW CAN SOCIAL JUSTICE ACTIVISTS EMBRACE ANIMAL RIGHTS?

When we recall Sasha's fear and desperation in her final moments of life, it is easy to see that she deserves nothing less than impassioned, urgent, and unequivocal advocacy by social justice advocates. But this article advocates for more modest first-steps.

First, animal rights must be thought of as a core social justice issue. That means the term "social justice" should evoke concerns about speciesism and the rights of nonhuman animals along with racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, ableism, classism, and other issues. This does not mean becoming a full-time animal rights activist, but it does mean identifying as someone who is opposed to speciesism. Animal rights should become a core component of social justice writings, panels, debates, and conversations.

Second, social justice activists should work to refrain from objectifying animals in their thoughts and language. The bodies of animals are not "meat." Animals are not inanimate "things." An animal is "someone", not "something." We should refer to individual animals as "him" or "her" or "they" but not "it." Similarly, I ask that social justice advocates stop reinforcing speciesism by saying things such as "Everyone deserves to be treated well simply because they are human." Not everyone is human, and everyone deserves to be treated well nonetheless.

Finally, social justice activists should speak up and challenge speciesism when they see it. Activists need to make an effort to confront those who promote

12. Feminist scholar Catharine Mackinnon has written about the similarities between the domination of women and the domination of animals. See Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Of Mice and Men: A Feminist Fragment on Animal Rights*, in ANIMAL RIGHTS: CURRENT DEBATES AND NEW DIRECTIONS 263 (Cass R. Sunstein & Martha C. Nussbaum eds., 2004).

13. E.g., *Mission Statement*, INTERNATIONAL WORK GROUP FOR INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS, <http://www.iwgia.org/iwgia/who-we-are-/mission-statement>.

violence against anyone, including animals and must be brave enough to talk to their friends and family about animal rights issues.

IV. CONCLUSION

Though social justice advocates may work in any number of different practice areas on an array of issues, the common thread among all social justice activists is the desire to be at the forefront of expanding moral circles, pushing mainstream boundaries. While it is hard to overstate the work left to do on issues of race, class, gender, and other human rights issues, in many ways animal rights is part of the next great frontier of moral progress. It is only a matter of time before animal rights is accepted as an integral part of a comprehensive social justice agenda.¹⁴ Only by recognizing and advocating for animal rights can we accurately claim that we advocate for liberty and justice for all. Sasha is counting on us.

14. A law and philosophy professor at NYU wrote that future generations will condemn us for our treatment of animals in industrial agriculture. Kwame Anthony Appiah, *How the Future Will Judge Us*, THE WASHINGTON POST, Sept. 26, 2010, at B1, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/09/24/AR2010092404113_2.html?sid=ST2010100105284.