Campaign for more humane treatment of animals, aiming to reduce the infliction of pain and distress, activists' efforts have particularly focused on the use of animals in scientific experiments, but have also drawn attention to the practices of the meat industry. See also vivisection.

Animal rights stem from early animal welfare organizations. However, there is a difference between the two movements. Animal rights advocates believe in letting animals live according to their nature and not be used as commodities. These activists believe that animals are similar enough to humans to deserve serious moral consideration and deserve a life lived not according to human goals. Thus, they do not eat meat, dairy products, or eggs; they do not wear leather, fur, or wool products; and they do not patronize corporations that produce these items or participate in animal testing. Animal welfare advocates believe that animals may not be able to reason, but they still feel pain and can suffer. This view differs from the animal rights perspective in that they can be used as commodities but must be treated humanely. Another term often used in animal rights circles is speciesism. Speciesism is the unjust discrimination of members of other species.

The theory of animal rights stems from feminism and environmentalism. These theories stem from the critique of instrumentalism. Instrumentalism is said to prevail in contemporary society in which nature, women, and animals are reduced to the status of tools and things to promote technology, markets, and bureaucracies. Theorists argue that animals and humans should not be used for economic gains. Animal rights activists believe that animals should not be used as a means to an ends but allowed to lead their own lives. This idea of "rights" is a non-negotiable moral value in which living, sentient beings have a right to live as they choose.

Charles Darwin's evolutional theory began to question the creation theory by reexamining human origin. This theory sought to show the similarities of humans and nonhumans by exhibiting common ancestry and the remnants of both anatomical and systemic similarities, in addition to common mental powers. Darwin found that animals felt pain, guilt, despair, joy, devotion, ill temper, anxiety, disgust, pride, helplessness, fear, horror, shyness, and modesty. Biological research supports this notion of anthropomorphic sensibilities in nonhumans. People seem to anthropomorphize their pets and wild animals, whether contained or in the wild. This furthers the notion that animals can feel emotions and pain.

By the 1860s, the first societies were formed to prevent animal cruelty. Humans began to see animals more as pets rather than as instruments of labor and production. By 1950, the Humane Society was formed and focused on overpopulation, abandonment, shelters, and cruelty to animals. Philosopher Peter Singer, from New York University, taught a course on animal liberation, thus beginning to inform most of the early movements around the animal rights belief system. He also wrote the books Animal Liberation and In Defense of Animals.

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By the 1970s, advocates started to target larger systematic activities of institutions. By researching scientific abstracts and grant proposals, Henry Spira, a student of Peter Singer, started to mobilize animal rights sensibilities into the beginning of contemporary animal rights activism. The American Museum of Natural History in Manhattan funded two psychologists in the Department of Animal Behavior. They were studying the neurological bases of sexual behavior through experiments on cats deprived of various sensations and brain functions. Procedures involved removing parts of the brain, severing nerves in the penis, and destroying their sense of smell. Spira and other protestors took to the streets of Manhattan and mobilized a massive protest stating that the experiments were sadistic, greedy, and only a way of getting government grants in exchange for animal blood and agony. Spira and other advocates also started a letterwriting campaign against the museum and found scientists who were willing to say that the experiments had no validity. This would be the beginning of animal rights protests on a large scale.

Rather than target doctors and certain companies for animal testing or circuses for the mistreatment of animals, animal rights advocates believe that animals should not be used at all under any circumstances. Arguments against animal testing and use for human goals stems from the notion that a life is a life whether human or nonhuman. It is rooted deeply in a moral belief system. The difference between humans and nonhumans is clear; however, some people believe that a human life is worth more than a nonhuman life and that an animal can be used for human use. However, animal rights advocates contend that this is a matter of belief and not based on evidence.

In 1980, Henry Spira organized a protest using fake white rabbits to protest Revlon's use of white rabbits to test cosmetics. The cosmetic company then paid Rockefeller University $750,000 to research alternative ways of testing the safety of their products. In 1984, the Animal Liberation Front (ALF) destroyed $20,000 and stole videotapes to later give to the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA). The videotapes showed the research of Thomas Gennanilli, who used baboons to test severe head injuries. The baboons were subjected to severe shocks and injuries to the head. PETA, founded by Ingrid Newkirk and Alex Pacheco, began to shift the focus of animal rights to scientific research. In May 1981, Alex Pacheco found immense cruelty and filthy conditions in a laboratory led by scientist Edward Taub in Silver Spring, Maryland. Taub was conducting neurological research involving severing nerves in the limbs of monkeys. The monkeys gnawed and attacked their numb limbs. Pacheco kept a diary and took photographs of feces, urine, and rust all over the cages. After the police seized the property and monkeys, Taub was found guilty on six counts of cruelty and fined $500. Although not highly successful, this case, along with the ALF's 1984 seizing of 60 hours of videotapes, allowed Pacheco and Newkirk to gain publicity to build animal rights' first successful letter-writing campaign.

By 1990, 300,000 people had become members of PETA. By 1987, many companies ended live animal testing. By 1990, several thousand animal welfare organizations and several hundred new animal rights groups had formed. In June 1990, 30,000 people marched on Washington to promote animal rights. Most of these protests argue against wildlife traffickers, hunters and trappers, laboratories where animal testing is performed, cosmetics and pharmaceutical firms, slaughterhouses, butchers, fur ranchers and retailers, rodeos, circuses, carriage drivers, and zoos. Animals used for entertainment such as racing, trained animal shows, bullfighting, animal fighting, and animal training for these events are deemed unnecessary and cruel. Animal testing for biomedical research is also a heated issue. Protests and education concerning alternatives to this kind of testing have been promoted by the Center for
Alternatives to Animal Testing at John Hopkins established in 1982. Many animal rights advocates are also vegetarians and promote the benefits of this lifestyle to the planet and healthy living. A meat-based diet is a waster of water, grain, and land because it wastes all these resources raising cows for slaughter. Issues like factory farming and fur companies have ranged from a question of cruelty to include a critique of the materialism of a consumer society and political critique of an economic system that encourages profits at the expense of animals. Stopping the use of animals as commodities is a goal shared by all in the animal rights movement.

Three movements, welfarist, pragmatist, and fundamentalist, make up the animal protection groups. Welfarists accept most current uses of animals but believes the pain and suffering should be minimized. The most influential animal welfare organizations are the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) and the Humane Society of the United States. Their primary strategies are protective legislation, education (on the humane treatment of animals), and shelters. Pragmatists believe that animals can be used when the benefits outweigh the suffering. They seek to reduce animal use through legal actions, political protest, and the pragmatic cooperation, negotiation, and acceptance of short-term compromises. Fundamentalists believe that animals should never be used regardless of the benefits. The ALF is one such fundamentalist organization. Their primary strategies use moralist rhetoric, condemnation, direct action, civil disobedience, and animal sanctuaries. These three movements range in their flexibility. Some believe in the fundamentalist belief system but protest in more pragmatic ways. Pragmatists and welfarists tend to contest what a full life is for an animal and the range of their cognitive awareness, thus creating further tensions within the movement. Fundamentalists believe that cows not only should not be slaughtered painfully but not used at all for human use. Chickens should not only be cage-free but should not be used for their eggs at all. These movements inform many of the goals of current animal welfare and rights organizations today.

Animal rights organizations vary in focus and sometimes on specific animals. More fundamentalist and pragmatist organizations focus on all animals, including PETA, ALF, the Humane Society of the United States, the Animal Legal Defense Fund, the American Anti-Vivisection Society, the International Society for Animal Rights, and SPCA. These organizations are growing in number and in political and economic power.

Further Readings


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