Counter-discourses and the relationship between humans and other animals

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Abstract

Several recent studies have critically analysed discourses involved in the oppression and exploitation of nonhuman animals, including those of the meat industry and zoos. This article turns the spotlight on counter-discourses, such as those of ecology and animal liberation, to ask if the alternatives they promote have the potential to contribute towards more harmonious relationships between humans and other animals. Despite their extreme importance in opposing oppressive discourses, the counter-discourses frequently share some of the basic assumptions of the discourses they criticise.

Keywords: environmentalism, ecology, animals, relationships, animal rights, discourse

Introduction

When we look back at the extraordinary progress humanity has made during the last 100 years, our satisfaction is inevitably marred by what has happened to the relationship between humans and other animals. While oppression and cruelty towards others may always have existed, the number of animals who have their lives ended or made miserable by human activity is now entirely unprecedented. In 2002, 10 billion birds and mammals were raised and killed in just one country, the United States, most of them confined 'so tightly that they [were] unable to stretch their limbs or walk even a step or two' (Singer 2003:3). It seems unlikely that people simply became more cruel as their countries developed; the explanation seems to lie more in the distance of the relationship

between an increasingly urban population, and nonhuman animals living out their lives far away behind locked doors.

Donovan (1993:185) suggests that 'We should not kill, eat, torture, and exploit animals because they do not want to be so treated, and we know that. If we listen, we can hear them.' Listening, in this sense, necessitates a relationship of observation and empathy which is close enough to understand the fundamental needs of other animals. In the same way that humans have needs for protection, affection, participation and creation (Max-Neef 1992), nonhuman animals also have needs beyond the minimum for sustaining their lives. Learning to listen again is important not only for relieving the suffering of animals, but also for relieving the psychological damage that is occurring in technological societies as humans become isolated from each other, from other animals, and from nature (see Clinebell 1996, Rozak, Gomes, and Kanner 1995). In Shepard's (1995:40) view, 'our profound love of animals' has been 'twisted into pets, zoos, decorations, and entertainment', and needs to be re-found as part of the process of becoming fully human.

But there is an equally pressing ecological reason why it is important to listen to other animals. In the optimal environment for animals - the natural environment to which they are adapted by their evolution - animals play an integrated role in maintaining balanced ecosystems. As Ekins, Hillman and Hutchinson (1992:50) point out, a natural system is 'a totally renewable, no-waste economy powered by the sun'; in other words, no inputs other than the sun's energy are required and all 'waste' is used up by other processes. Compare this to the unnatural environments of intensive farms, where animals are deliberately prevented from living according to their nature. These farms suck in (and waste) huge amounts of grain and other foodstuffs, and disgorge environmentally damaging waste. Other ways of going against animals' nature include destroying or fragmenting their habitats, selectively killing large numbers of specific species, forcing animals to adapt to monoculture environments, and introducing species to alien environments, all of which can damage the ecosystems on which life depends (see Miller 2002).

As Capra (1997) shows, making human systems as close as possible to natural systems can have beneficial consequences for humans, other animals and all life. Such systems can only be created by 'following the examples in the natural world, rather than always seeking to improve on or second guess them' (Ekins, Hillman and Hutchinson 1992:50), which entails creating relationships with other animals in which it is possible empathise with and understand, rather than violate, their natures.

Relationships among humans are partially constructed through language; for example, the existence and use of insulting and offensive epithets does not merely reflect relationships of hate, the words themselves are the building blocks of such relationships. The importance of language lies in the way that, as Halliday (2001:179) describes, 'our 'reality' is not something readymade and waiting to be meant - it has to be actively construed; and…language evolved in the process of, and as the agency of, its construal'.

The relationship between humans and other animals is, therefore, partially constructed by the language used to talk to and about them. Some people, for instance, patronise and command pets in speech, establishing relationships of domination; and the names of animals are frequently spoken as insults (*dog*, *pig*, *snake* etc). There have recently been a number of detailed studies of specialist discourses: those of the animal product industries, pharmaceutical industries, zoos, hunting and circuses (including Stibbe 2003, 2001 and Dunayer 2001). The studies reveal how, within these discourses, metaphors, grammatical constructions, pronouns and other linguistic features portray nonhuman animals as objects, machines, or inferior beings, and so contribute to the moral licensing of otherwise unconscionable levels of cruelty to nonhuman animals. In addition, economic discourses traditionally ignore altogether the impact of economic activity on nonhuman animals and their natural environments, constructing both as resources and raw materials which exist solely for human consumption.

In opposition to oppressive discourses such as these, influential counter-discourses have arisen, including a great variety related to animal liberation, animal rights, ecology and the environmental movement. An important question is whether these counter-discourses promote and enable the construction of human-animal relationships in more harmonious ways. For all the reasons suggested above, harmonious relationships can be defined as those in which humans respect other animals, listen to them, accept the validity of their realities, and allow them (as far as possible) to live according to their own natures (see Donovan 1993).

There are, of course, many counter-discourses, and many strands within each. Far from being a complete review, therefore, the following sections focus on aspects of influential counter-discourses which are particularly relevant to constructing relationships between humans and other animals.

Counter-discourses

The discourse of ecology and ecological economics

Through the metaphor of 'ecosystem', the discourse of ecology represents biological organisms (animals, plants and micro-organisms) as inter-dependent and sustained by interactions among themselves and with their physical environment. This opens the way to conceptualise more equitable relationships between humans and other animals, based on mutual dependence, symbiosis, and a non-hierarchical acceptance of all species, including humans, as co-inhabitants of larger ecosystems. In other words, the discourse of ecology could contribute to the 'land ethic' proposed by Leopold (1966:240): 'In short, a land ethic changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such'.

However, as McNeill (2000:335) points out, ecologists in the past have tended to pretend that humans did not exist: '[r]ather than sully their science with the uncertainties of human affairs, they sought out pristine patches in which to monitor energy flows and population dynamics. Consequently they had no political, economic -or ecological- impact.' And we could add, limited impact on improving relationships between human and other animals.

Subsequent approaches to ecology, including *human ecology* and *ecological economics*, have attempted to include humans in the larger picture. However, there is still a reluctance among some strands of human ecology to use discourse which firmly places humans *within* ecosystems. For example, the Ecological Society of America (1997:4) writes that 'Humanity obtains from natural ecosystems an array of ecosystem goods - organisms and their parts and products'. This kind of language facilitates a conceptualisation of ecosystems as existing separately from humans, almost like supermarkets where humans can take supplies from, rather than as systems where all life is mutually sustained. Ecosystems, and all the animals within, become treated as human resources, the following being a typical example:

> Ecosystems generate ecological resources and services that are crucial for human welfare…an ecosystem…consists of and sustains a unique array of biotic or 'living' components…many

> of which also support human production or consumption...we refer to these as *ecological resources* (Barbier, Burgess and Folke 1994)

This extract metaphorically constructs 'ecosystems' as machines for creating human resources, by combining the term 'ecosystem' with terms from the discourse of machines ('array' and 'components'). Nonhuman animals, in this case, are 'biotic components', of a machine generating recourses to fuel human consumption. This kind of discourse seems to have failed to break away from the assumption that nonhuman animals are resources for humans - the same assumption adopted by exploitative discourses.

Daly and Farley's textbook '*Ecological Economics: principles and applications*' provides a particularly clear example of the portrayal of nonhuman animals as resources. In one section, Daly and Farley (2004:43) provide a quotation from the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) which asserts, 'the state of Earth's natural ecosystems has declined by about 33 per cent over the last 30 years'. They then re-express this in their own terms: 'this means that the capacity of natural capital…to supply life support services has declined by about 33%' (Daly and Farley 2004:34). In re-construing the WWF statement using the discourse of economics, they fail to heed Ekins, Hillman and Hutchinson (1992:50) warning that 'To refer to the Earth, including its wealth of living systems, as "ecological capital" is already to devalue it'.

The problem lies in the extent to which Daly and Farley use the discourse of economics in making their case. Daly and Farley's book is based on the important insight that 'The economic system is a subsystem of the global ecosystem' (Daly and Farley 2004:61). However, they use the discourse of economics to describe ecosystems as if ecosystems were merely a subset of the human economy, rather than the other way round. Consider these examples:

> …the structural elements of an ecosystem are stocks of biotic and abiotic resources (minerals, water, trees, other plants and animals), which when combined together generate ecosystem…services (ibid:94)

> Intact ecosystems are funds that provide ecosystem services, while their structural components are stocks that provide a flow of raw materials (ibid:104)

In this arrangement, the global ecosystem is represented as a partner in a global economic system designed to serve human needs. Nonhuman animals are constructed as providing goods to humans, and the ecosystems they live within are described as providing waste disposal services ('...ecosystems process waste, render it harmless to humans…' ibid:75). However, in return for their goods and services, nonhuman animals receive only toxins, confinement or death. There seems to be very little consideration of the ecological services humans must necessarily *provide* to others (including other animals) within the ecosystem in order for the ecosystem as a whole to survive.

It is informative to ask 'where are the nonhuman animals?' in Daly and Farley's discourse. Two quotations which are particularly revealing, are as follows:

> Waste has a direct impact on human well-being and further diminishes ecosystem function. (ibid 2004:109)

> First, accumulating toxins have direct negative effects on humans. Second, the toxins damage ecosystems and degrade the ecosystem services on which we depend. (ibid 2004:119)

In both of these quotations, nonhuman animals are part of 'ecosystem function' or 'ecosystem services', but the negative effects of waste are considered only in relation to humans. Only occasionally are other species talked about as if they mattered for their own sake, in examples such as 'Many fish species have dangerously high levels of mercury and other metals, which cause human birth defects and worse when consumed, not to mention their impacts on other species.' (ibid 2004:120).

There is no doubt that the discipline of ecological economics provides an important new direction for economists, encouraging them to include in their considerations the effects of economic activity on ecosystems, with great potential to oppose ecologically destructive discourses. However, in terms of reconstructing the relationship between humans and other animals, discourse along the lines of Daly and Farley (2004) fails to transcend the anthropocentric assumptions of oppressive economic discourses, which consider nonhuman animals only in terms of their use to humans. It is hard to imagine empathy with a 'biotic component', a 'biotic resource', a 'raw material', or a piece of 'natural capital'.

The discourse of Deep Ecology

The anthropocentrism existing in both oppressive discourses and in some counter-discourses, is directly opposed by the discourse of the deep ecology movement (Naess 1990, 1973, Devall and Sessions 1985). The deep ecology movement presents a biocentric view which has great potential to contribute to harmonious relationships between humans and other animals:

> The wellbeing and flourishing of human and nonhuman Life on Earth have value in themselves (synonyms: intrinsic value, inherent value). These are independent of the usefulness of the nonhuman world for human purposes. (Devall and Sessions 1985:70)

This is an important challenge, but it could be argued that the representation of 'value' as an objective attribute possessed by animals has the side-effect of cutting humans out of the scene. Usually, in order for someone or something to have value, there must be an active agent doing the valuing. In using the term 'intrinsic value', the agent is suppressed by the normalisation of the word 'value'. This appears to be intentional:

> The presence of inherent value in a natural object is independent of any awareness, interest, or appreciation of it by a conscious being. (Regan, quoted in Devall and Sessions 1985:71)

The effect of this construal is a representation of value as something which exists *outside of* relationships. Intrinsic value is a quality for which nonhuman animals have little use in isolation from humans. Only when in contact with humans does it become literally 'vital' that they are

valued. In discourses which aim to promote closer relationships between humans and other animals, it seems necessary to bring back the human agent of the process of valuing: providing inspiration for humans *to value* (verb) other animals, rather than asserting that other animals *have value* (noun) or *are valuable* (adjective).

The discourse of wildlife conservation

Related to the discourse of ecology is the discourse of wildlife conservation, exemplified most publicly by the World Wildlife Fund. The discourse of the WWF is, on one hand, scientific, referring to nonhuman animals in abstract terms such as 'species, subspecies, varieties and subpopulations' (WWF 2004). The concentration is on types of animals rather than individuals:

> If current trends continue unabated, several cetacean *species* and many *populations* will be lost in the next few decades. (WWF 2004, emphasis added).

Discourse conducted at the level of collective nouns has the side-effect of distracting attention away from direct relationships with individual animals: an individual can be seen, heard, and empathised with, but a 'species' cannot. The scientific abstractions of the discourse of conservation can, of course, play an important role in saving members of endangered species from extinction, but by definition, these animals are few and far between. If only 'species' are to be saved, then the discourse of conservation has nothing to say about confining, hurting or killing animals in ways which do not threaten the species as a whole. There is a degree of separation, therefore, between species conservation and developing relationships of respect with nonhuman animals in general.

However, the discourse of the WWF has another side which attempts to create more direct empathy with animals. In the context of fund-raising, the WWF (2004) gives glowing descriptions of twelve endangered species (salmon, elephants, gorillas, turtles, pandas, pikas, polar bears, rhinos, snow leopards, tigers, whales and dolphins), including statements such as 'The lovable and charismatic panda is one of the most popular animals in the world.' (WWF 2004). The following list shows all the adjectives used to describe these twelve species:

largest, larger, plentiful, mighty, huge, powerful, endangered, numerous, widespread, wondrous, remarkable, loveable, charismatic, popular, small, shy, majestic, silver, anadromous (WWF 2004)

From this list, it can be seen that the criteria being used to encourage people to value other animals centre around (in order of frequency) *large size*, *rarity*, *cuteness/charisma/popularity*, *power*, and *majesty*. The only exception is the small, shy, pika - the 'canary in the coal mine' (WWF 2004) for global warming.

The success of the WWF's fund-raising tells us that discourse of this kind does, indeed, encourage respect for other animals; but the criteria it uses establishes a hierarchy of animals, in which respect is reserved for the large and the rare. It by-passes relationships between humans and the majority of animals - the kind of animals people are most likely to encounter face-to-face in their daily lives, or influence through their purchases of animal products.

The discourse of animal liberation

The animal liberation movement, in contrast to wildlife conservation, focuses specifically on those animals who suffer most at the hands of humans - the ones whose relationships with humans consist of little more than exploitation and abuse. Animal liberation, at first, seems an ideal discourse to promote a radical change in human/other animal relationships, yet this discourse too has its limitations. Tester (1991:196) sums up one limitation by claiming that within the animal liberation movement ‘The animals are nothing more than objects to which something is done.’ This claim can be substantiated through critical discourse analysis of animal liberation texts (see Fairclough 2003).

While there are, of course, many different kinds of texts related to animal liberation, Peter Singer (2003, 1990, 1985) has been extremely influential, and his work provides a prototypical example of at least one major thread in the broader discourse of animal liberation. It is useful to analyse Singer (1985) in some detail, because it provides a summary of the philosophy of the Animal Liberation Movement using a form of discourse which is widespread within the movement. The summary contains statements such as:

> Why do we lock up chimpanzees in appalling primate research centres…yet would never think of doing the same to a retarded human being at a much *lower* mental level? The only possible answer is that the chimpanzee, no matter how bright, is not human, while the retarded human, no matter how dull, is. This is speciesism…(Singer 1985: 6)

This extract presupposes a form of interaction in which people use a moral calculus to decide how to treat nonhuman animals according to how they would treat humans. In terms of relationships, this implies conceptualising nonhuman animals in human terms rather than treating animals with respect for who they are. Singer makes an important moral point, but the discourse it is made in seems to be more about humans than about nonhuman animals. Within the summary there are 246 references to humans compared to only 96 references to other animals. And when nonhuman animals are mentioned, they are usually (89% of the time) referred to in the abstract (e.g., 'animals', 'those not of our species' or 'other creatures').

As represented in Singer's summary, animals have very little agency in their own affairs. Tester's claim that nonhuman animals are represented in animal liberation discourse as nothing more than objects to which something is done, is partially born out by the grammatical constructions used. There are 20 cases in the summary where animals appear as grammatical objects, mostly as the affected participants of material processes (actions, deeds) carried out by human agents (see Halliday 2004; Goatly 2000). And as expected, these material processes frequently involve abuse: the human agent *treats animals cruelly, deprives pigs of room, poisons rats, locks up chimpanzees, confines cows, uses nonhuman animals, experiments on monkeys, captures wild animals, takes the life of a fish, kills a fish*, etc.

Equally often (in 20 cases) nonhuman animals appear as grammatical subjects. The difference, however, is that when nonhuman animals play the role of subject, none of the processes they undertake are material processes. Instead, *animals have rights, animals were property, other creatures have interests, the chimpanzee is not human, cows like lush pastures, nonhuman animals suffer, fish do not have a clear conception of themselves*. These processes are relational, existential and mental, although the mental processes of animals are illuminated only in so far as they 'suffer', or negatively, in terms of not possessing a 'clear conception'.

Where are the nonhuman animals in the discourse of animal liberation? Buried in generic terms, grammatically realised as objects, or the subjects of non-material processes, and often

embedded in complements or adjuncts. This represents the grim reality of intensive farming, where animals are denied agency and are pushed out of mind as far as possible. The animal liberation movement strongly resists this treatment of animals, but does not necessarily provide a vision of more harmonious relationships, or a discourse which could help create these relationships.

The discourse of animal rights

The discourse of animal rights has much in common with that of animal liberation, but explicitly calls for legal rights to be established for certain nonhuman species of animals. An important role of animal rights discourse is in countering one of the main assumptions of oppressive discourses: that humans are superior to all other species because of the uniqueness of their intellect, language ability, self-conception, or other arbitrary characteristics. To counteract belief in the uniqueness of humans, statements such as the following frequently appear in the discourse of animal rights:

> they [animals] practice agriculture…ants construct special chambers containing fungus and bring leaves to nourish it…animals can make tools: chimpanzees shape sticks…bees convey information about the…quality of nectar…animals possess…the power to deceive others! Plovers will feign a broken wing to lead predators away…chimps can negotiate mazes…great apes possess the ability to learn and to express thought in human forms of discourse…(Gold 1995: 29-30)

Unlike much of the discourse of animal liberation, animals are represented here as active participants - as agents of material processes. The material processes in which the animals are engaged, however, are the kinds of activities to which humans are naturally suited, to a much greater extent than other animals.

Discourse such as this is based on an assumption which is the same as that of the oppressive discourses it is countering: that superiority lies in the ability to perform arbitrary tasks such as speaking, solving intellectual puzzles, or making tools. While the attempt is clearly to show that humans are not unique, this form of discourse perpetuates the biased criteria that oppressive discourse gives for judging superiority, while still rendering animals inferior because of their lesser ability to perform these tasks. Chimpanzees' may be able to make tools, but if this is the criteria for

judging superiority then humans will still be superior since their tools (e.g., fighter planes) are more sophisticated.

If the assumption that animals should be judged in terms of their (minimal) ability to mimic humans is rejected, people may learn to listen to other animals, and appreciate them for the way they perform the tasks for which they are naturally suited. Some animals are expert at searching for warm air currents to soar effortless in the sky, others create a social map through surrounding smells, others are skilled in finding their way in a pathless jungles, and nearly all nonhuman animals are masters of living ecologically.

The essence of animal rights discourse is that it is illogical to cause suffering to nonhuman animals because there are no relevant differences between humans and (at least some) other animals which could justify the difference in treatment. However, the emphasis on logic has been criticised for being excessively rationalist (Donovon 1993: 168). Indeed, Regan's (1985) *The case for animal rights* attempts to create distance from emotion and sentiment, despite the fact that these (rather than logic alone) form the basic building blocks of good relationships, as well as the motivation to work towards more harmonious relationships. Regan writes that:

> And since…we must recognise our equal inherent value as individuals, reason - not sentiment, not emotion - reason compels us to recognise the equal inherent value of these animals and, with this, their equal right to be treated with respect (Regan 1985: 24)

This exhibits what Donovan (1993:168) calls an 'inherent bias in contemporary animal rights theory towards rationalism, which, paradoxically, in the form of Cartesian objectivism, established a major theoretical justification for animal abuse.' In this way, animal rights discourse uses some of the same tools as oppressive discourses, but for diametrically opposite ends. By focusing attention away from 'emotion', the discourse of animal rights has the potential to discourage sensitivity towards and understanding of the emotions of nonhuman animals.

The rationalist approach also makes animal rights discourse susceptible to counter-attacks which attempt to dismiss the whole foundation of the movement by mimicking and disrupting its basic logic. For example, Lomborg (2001), who sets out to show that the state of the world is improving, has a vested interest in ignoring the ever-increasing suffering of nonhuman animals. He uses the same logical discourse as animals rights, but with the opposite goal, of excusing his exclusion of nonhuman animals in his assessment of the state of the world:

> while some…people will definitely choose to value animals and plants very highly, these plants and animals cannot to any great extent be given particular rights…Should penguins have the right to vote?...If we use the inalienable rights argument we could not explain why we choose to save some animals at the bottom of the sea while at the same time we slaughter cattle for beef. (Lomborg 12)

This treats nonhuman animals as tokens or categories, rather than sentient beings, to be manipulated for the sake of making a logical point, and the discourse of animal rights is very susceptible to attacks of this type.

Conclusion

Looking at the extensive research available on other oppressive discourses, such as those of sexism, racism, and ableist discourse, there is a clear pattern to the way exploitative discourses are resisted. When enough attention is focused on the oppressive nature of a particular discourse, a counter-discourse arises and is adopted with enthusiasm by activists. At first, the counter-discourse appears to offer the path to liberation, but gradually it becomes clear that it does not completely break away from the assumptions of the oppressive discourse, or provide a complete solution. An example is the highly oppressive medical model of disability, which was vigorously resisted with a new discourse (the 'social model'), in ways which had huge benefits for the disabled population. The social model was the main focus of disability activists for a long time before its limitations were exposed and researchers started looking in new directions, but never backwards towards the oppressive medical model (Crow 1996).

Discourses of oppression have a built in resilience through their employment of categorical and rationalist phraseology which gives the sub-message that ‘This is the one-and-only possible Truth’. To oppose such discourses, counter-discourses often make use the same kind of authoritarian presentation since this style is more likely to be published and prove influential. The problem is that if and when counter-discourses succeed, they too become resilient, and it becomes difficult to transcend them with new discourses which address their shortcomings. Singer’s discourse, for example, has changed little in 30 years (see Singer 2003), and still has a central place in the animal liberation movement. In fact, all the counter-discourses described above follow resilient ways of writing to greater or lesser extents. For instance:

> What's wrong - fundamentally wrong - isn't the details that vary from case to case…what's wrong isn't the pain, the suffering…These compound what's wrong…But they are not the fundamental wrong. The fundamental wrong is the system that allows us to view animals as *our resources*…(Regan 1985:3)

This extract uses categorical assertions of fact, with no hedging of the kind 'one way to think about this', or 'potentially', or 'from one perspective' (see Fairclough 2003:41). This way of writing poses a strong challenge to the oppressive discourse, but it closes down the space for alternative discourses to challenge the assumptions of the writer. For example, the use of the expression 'the fundamental wrong' rather than 'a fundamental wrong' is not open to the possibility that other discourses in the future may describe other fundamental wrongs.

New discourses will arise, but the categorical style of writing means that they will have to challenge and compete, rather than co-exist and complement. As Tester (1991:13) points out, different factions of the animal rights movement have been 'refighting the quarrel between Tweedledee and Tweedledum' for a long time. There is a danger, then, that counter discourses simply provide alternative hegemonic discourses.

The main similarity between oppressive discourses and the counter-discourses which oppose them, is the tendency to treat both human and other species of animals within socially-constructed realities, rather than engaging with the lived reality of the animals themselves. Nonhuman animals are considered to be resources, species, subspecies, varieties, subpopulations, objects of abuse, moral categories, possessors of rights, or entities whose value lies either in rarity, size, or in their ability to mimic human behaviour. But despite providing important opposition to oppressive discourses, these counter-discourses do not necessarily encourage an attitude of approaching other animals with respect and with a willingness to see the world from their perspective.

An implication of the discussion in this article is that, in order to work towards improving the relationship between humans and other animals, it is necessary to treat counter-discourses with critical awareness. This involves recognising their important contribution to countering oppressive discourses, but at the same time supplementing them with discourses which represent nonhuman animals from a vantage point of deep empathy - as agents of their own lives, living for their own purposes. Bate (2000:ix) searches Romantic English poetry for discourses which attempt to heal 'Western man's alienation from nature'. Within the literature, poetry, and story-telling of the world,

may lie similar discourses which, if popularised and combined with counter-discourse, could help improve the relationship between humans and other animals.

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