

To be or not to be?

Does man have a divine right and privilege to freely use his fellow animals in any way he pleases to fulfill his every need and desire, at the full expense of the well-being of these poor beasts?

Well, many theologians claim that we do, and so do even quite a number of profane moral philosophers.

The logical, Darwinian answer to the question, however, is no. The freedom to use non-human animals for labor, company, recreation, entertainment, food and clothing is not a God-given but a brutal right we helped ourselves to, without asking, after first having proven ourselves - by the sword, of course - to be the fittest of the species on this planet.

We don't really know whether the concept of animal rights existed as little as a century or two ago. It probably didn't, at least not in our sense. Nevertheless, there's no evidence to prove that the quality of life for animals in

general is any better today than it was in the Middle Ages or even further back - on the contrary, in fact.

The radical animal rights activist movement that first emerged in the late seventies and grew powerful during the nineties is a natural part of the global green-leftist wave that followed the general leftist movement of the sixties and seventies. The moral stance of the most radical activists is simple: we humans have no right whatsoever to use animals in any way for our own purposes, and must immediately cease doing so. This is a clear and solid moral philosophy that must be fully respected, although its consequences - if the theory were applied in practice - are hard to fathom.

When you start compromising this theory - making own personal interpretations of and exemptions from it - things immediately become very complicated. For example, is it more morally justifiable to keep a cow in captivity to make ice cream than to kill a pig to make hot dogs? It then becomes up to each and every

one of us to decide his or her own moral and practical priorities.

The hard core of the global radical vegan movement consists of a small group of people with purist ideals, living their lives according to stern doctrines, never using animal products of any kind. The vast majority of the much larger animal rights movement is of the 'softer' kind - people who may not eat red meat or wear fur, but have not given up cottage cheese or suede shoes.

Among radical and 'moderate' animal rights activists alike, fur has been singled out as one of the most morally reprehensible ways of using and abusing animals. The standard argument as to why it is more cruel to kill an animal to cut a fur coat than to grind it into hamburger is that one can live without the one but not without the other. From this perspective fur is viewed as being the most downright 'unnecessary' item of nearly all animal products.

This argument is easy to contradict. A pig is hardly likely to go to his death with a lighter heart hoping to be turned into pizza ham than he would had he known he was becoming a wallet. Objective scientific studies prove that fur animals in general have a quality of life that is substantially higher than that of pigs and poultry, but slightly lower than that of cattle. In terms of degrees of necessity, science has conclusively proven that humans could easily live without any use of animal products - and even that we would probably be healthier and certainly make more rational and fair use of our planet's finite resources if we did. Indeed, excessive use of animal products in food is one of the main factors behind one of the western world's most serious health problems: obesity.

Pro-fur groups using the same kind of subjectively slanted moral reasoning for their own purposes could easily turn the above argument around and claim that if an animal is going to die, it is at least more respectful to turn it into an artistic garment of lasting value than into leather soles and dog pellets.

Such arguments are, of course, equally irrelevant, not to say macabre. The truth is simple: until the day arrives when we finally give up the right over other animals that we've claimed for ourselves, once and for all, it remains up to each and every one of us to judge what uses are more or less morally acceptable, hoping, for the sake of our fellow animals, that recent developments towards a more humane, respectful and decent treatment of all domesticated animals will continue, and at an even faster pace.

It seems clear that the real reasons for why wearing fur is generally considered a more offensive abuse of animal rights than going fishing are twofold: one is that fur is such a visually and emotionally aggressive reminder of the cruel rights we've claimed over animals and the other is that fur has always been one of the most blatant symbols of superiority. Once again, it's the primeval symbolic potency of fur, our original clothing, revealing itself. Fashion designer Lawrence Steele probably speaks for quite a few 'soft' animal rights 'sympathizers' when he states:

"Let's say that I can't wait until the day when we can grow fur on trees. Until then, there are many worse things than keeping animals for fur but few things more fantastic than the fur itself."