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WEIGHING AND PROTECTING LIFE: BEYOND SPECIESISM, WELFARISM, AND LEGALISM

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Joan Dunayer. *Speciesism*. Derwood, MD: Ryce Publishing, 2004.

“We must eliminate false hopes, which blind us to real possibilities.”

—Derrick Jensen (2004)

In her two key works, *Animal Equality* and *Speciesism*, Joan Dunayer has made crucial contributions to ethics and animal rights by uncovering the human biases and prejudices against other species such as are embedded throughout our language.¹ What was done for racist and sexist language needs to be done for speciesist language, and Dunayer has helped lead the way in her books and articles.

With philosopher Gary Francione, Dunayer stands out as one of the most radical champions of animal rights and abolitionism of all forms of animal slavery. Just as Francione unmasked “new welfarists” who speak in the language of rights but advance welfarist policies in practice (such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals [PETA]), Dunayer seeks to expose the “new speciesists” (including Francione himself!) who pretend to be antispeciesist but ultimately elevate human interests over nonhumans and thereby wrongly discriminate against other species.

Throughout *Speciesism*, Dunayer drives a rigorous line of reasoning that doesn’t flinch from its logical consequences, such that the value of a mouse’s life is exactly equal to that of a human, yet these conclusions often are problematic and flawed. Two key problems stand out. The first problem, philosophical in nature, arises from the logical incoherence of her radical egalitarianism that rejects any attempt to compare moral values among different life forms. The second problem, political in nature, stems from a naïve “legalism” that assumes abolitionist goals can be won through the corporate-dominated channels of the state, thereby failing to see the need to pursue illegal and far-more forceful methods of struggle.

Although Dunayer follows Peter Singer, Tom Regan, Francione, and other key philosophers in rejecting speciesism as arbitrary and unjustifiable, she finds that ultimately they are all “new speciesists” who often violate the principle of equality by privileging humans over nonhumans.

On Singer’s view, for instance, there is a moral premium on self-awareness and mental complexity to which one can appeal to weigh different values if necessary. For Singer (1990),

it is not arbitrary to hold that the life of a self-aware being, capable of abstract thought, of planning for the future, of complex acts of communication, and so on, is more valuable than the life of a being without these capacities. (p. 20)

Thus, for Singer, it is worse to cut short the life of a “normal” brain-functioning human than a dog, as the human has a more complex form of “personhood”; however, it is wrong to favor a brain-dead human over a dog for the same reason.

Dunayer, in bold contrast, vehemently rejects all appeals to cognitive complexities and existential differentiation to insist on the total equality of any form of sentient life. As much as I admire her all-out assault on human supremacy, I submit that we do and must make choices between life forms all the time, and we thereby unavoidably judge and weigh relative life values. The criteria for such choices may often be tacit and unconscious; however, it is necessary, and not necessarily speciesist, to attempt a rational formulation of these principles such as Singer, Regan, and others do.

Is it desirable or even possible in all cases not to operate without some hierarchical scheme? Can one ever be nonspeciesist in the pure and total way Dunayer seeks? Isn't Dunayer, like everyone else, complicit in the destruction of life and doesn't she privilege herself, humans, or some animals over other animals all the time? If we want to take a walk in the park, for example, we will unavoidably step on and kill countless insects we do not see. We know this in advance but take the walk anyway, so what makes our desire for a walk more important than the lives of insects we will unavoidably trample on? The same complexities face us when choosing among the lives of nonhuman animals. When we kill ticks and fleas that annoy and can sicken our cats and dogs, we value our pets over ticks and fleas. A choice has to be made, such that we will provide comfort to one life at the expense of another. To choose our beloved cats or dogs over fleas is discriminatory; however, it is neither arbitrary nor wrong.

Dunayer's radical approach leads her into numerous inconsistencies and hypocrisies. She admits, for instance, that she would kill a bear in self-defense to preserve her own existence. Self-defense is a legitimate reason for causing harm to another being; however, her hypothetical action is inconsistent with her radical egalitarianism, for she is assuming that her life is more important than the life of a bear who needs food. However, how can she conclude this if all beings and things are equal? She thus values her own life—and perhaps human life in general in such cases—over an animal's need to live by obtaining a tasty human meal. And suppose that the bear is an endangered species—is it not infinitely more valuable, in the grand scheme of evolution and biodiversity, than Dunayer's life or the life of any human at all? Although we certainly can disagree about what criteria should be employed, we cannot avoid making choices, however we might try to deny them. To paraphrase Jean Paul Sartre, we are condemned to making ethical choices and arranging moral hierarchies.

Given her radical philosophical commitment to egalitarianism, one would expect to see a parallel commitment to militant tactics and politics; however, instead there is a major disjoint.

Although Dunayer sketches a general picture of what her version of authentic abolitionist campaigns would be like in practice, the book is striking for (a) its naïve faith in capitalist “democracy” and (b) its failure to discuss the most-controversial

elements of animal rights politics, namely, the ever-growing use of illegal, direct action approaches, such as the rescues, raids, and sabotage associated with the Animal Liberation Front or the high-pressure tactics of the Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty (SHAC) campaign.² Demonized by corporations and governments as terrorists, these groups have rescued animals and shut down exploiters, succeeding where legal tactics would fail.

As militant liberation tactics have become increasingly prominent and controversial in the United Kingdom, United States, and elsewhere, it is a glaring failure that Dunayer ignores and evades the key struggles and debates of the present, as ever-more abolitionists see legislative tactics as futile and take extreme actions appropriate to the extreme situation of animal exploitation. Dunayer does discuss and endorse “open rescues” whereby activists free animals from cages and, unlike the “closed” approach of masked Animal Liberation Front (ALF) activists, take full responsibility for violating the law. Plausibly enough, she contends that such rescues are just stopgap measures as they save relatively few animals and are easily replaced by others. Yet she assumes an all-or-nothing outlook, failing to see the open and closed rescues are crucial elements in a larger global struggle against animal slavery, and she shows no such skepticism of her favored legislative-based tactics.

Ultimately, Dunayer presents a staid defense of the political status quo as the solution to animal exploitation, thereby arriving at the same conclusions as the blatantly welfarist organizations she reviles, such as the Humane Society of the United States. Her abolitionism is based on a fundamental misconception of the state. The fundamental role of the capitalist state—always has been, always will be—is not to protect citizen rights and promote justice but rather to protect the profits and property of corporations. Dunayer’s modern-day version of abolitionism has little to do with the abolitionist movement of the 19th century, which was galvanized and advanced by widespread acts of sabotage, arson, and violence against slave masters. Nat Turner, John Brown, and countless other abolitionists defended and/or employed sabotage, arson, and violence as necessary and legitimate tactics in the struggle to free Black slaves. Why aren’t these same tactics necessary and legitimate to use for rescuing animal slaves and stopping the animal slave trade?

Critics of illegal direct-action tactics cite chapter and verse of King and Gandhi; however, they labor with overly romanticized and idealistic views of human nature, believing that species supremacists can be converted through appeals to their compassion, humanity, religion, and reason. Although a small minority of animal exploiters can be changed through education and moral persuasion, the vast majority are ideologically and economically wedded to violence against animals. Direct-action critics rely on an equally naïve model of political struggle that assumes that “democratic” systems are sufficiently pluralistic and receptive to appeals for justice and rights that activists can defeat the economic and political monopolization of power held by corporations and powerful special interest groups. It is amazing to note, Dunayer and other self-proclaimed abolitionists continue to champion legalist methods in the aftermath of two arguably stolen elections by George Bush and his cronies; in the repressive environment of the USA PATRIOT Act; from within a web of total surveillance of citizens and dissenters; in the face of encroaching fascism; and amid the most-cynical, corrupt, corporate-controlled, oppressive, and illegal political administration in U.S. history.

Dunayer thinks there is a paradigm shift between welfarism and a genuine rights-based approach, but the continuities are at least as significant as the

discontinuities. The main division in the animal advocacy movement is not between animal welfare and animal rights approaches, but rather between “legalists” who support change only in and through corporate-dominated political channels and direct action “pluralists” who acknowledge the value of education and legislation-based approaches but also insist that sabotage, raids, and other illegal actions are necessary to free captive animals and to stop animal exploiters protected by the state.

In addition to sabotage, questions of the efficacy and legitimacy of violence must also be addressed, not avoided. If animals are under violent attack and cannot defend themselves, if the state protects only their oppressors, and if animal rights activists are the only ones who can defend animals, do they not have the right to use sabotage and even violence against exploiters as proxy agents adhering to the principle I call “extensional self-defense”? Similarly, the principles of just war theory state that violence is morally justifiable if all nonviolent options of resistance or self-defense have been exhausted, and the minimal amount of violence needed to defeat injustice is used. Is just war theory not applicable to the war between animal exploiters and animal liberators, and does it not justify the use of violence as all peaceful and legal measures have failed to stop the genocide? In addition, don’t the precepts of “humanitarian war,” a justification human rights hawk Bill Clinton used for bombings on Yugoslavia, apply to liberating animals with “forceful intervention” (to use Clinton’s language) to prevent future harm? And isn’t Bush’s doctrine of “preemptive strikes” also available to abolitionists to justify violence against animal oppressors?

If *welfarism* means bigger cages, and *rights* means abolition, and if abolition is justified “by any means necessary” in existing conditions of pervasive and institutionalized violence, unfolding on a global scale far larger than Auschwitz and Treblinka, then rights and/or abolitionist theory demands discussing and pursuing all kinds of political and tactical paths. If sabotage, violence, and armed struggle are necessary to protect, defend, and rescue human life, why not for animals also? Animal advocates who defend sabotage or violence to defend humans but not animals are speciesists.

However the questions will be answered, they need to be raised, not evaded. One expects as much from mealy-mouthed welfarists; however, one seeks much more from avowed militants such as Dunayer. The key question that goes unanswered is: What full range of tactics is appropriate and justified for a true abolitionist position and politics?

On the whole, *Speciesism* is a superb examination of the moral and political failures of welfarism, and a lucid examination of rights and the abolitionist policies an animal rights position implies and demands. Despite its philosophical inconsistencies and political deficits, this book is a must read for the entire animal advocacy movement and worthy of careful study and sustained discussion.

NOTES

1. For review symposium of Animal Equality, see Gaines and Jermier (2000).
2. For a detailed discussion of the Animal Liberation Front (ALF) and the ethical and tactical questions raised by such an underground approach raises, see Best and Nocella (2004).

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