1 Origins of the animal rights movement

Non-violence leads to the highest ethics, which is the goal of all evolution. Until we stop harming all other living beings, we are still savages.

– Thomas Alva Edison (1847-1931), inventor

As with many other movements, animal rights activism is diverse and broad. Its modern stirrings stem from the broader humanitarian ideals from which it was conceived and it continues to draw upon and influence in equal measure today.

THE ANIMAL RIGHTS movement identifies with other struggles for justice. Many activists, particularly those involved in the actual liberation of animals, compare themselves with early anti-slavery advocates. Many of the tactics and strategies that the movement uses have been borrowed from earlier historic struggles. Activism has also been profoundly influenced by the animal welfare and environmental movements, which also grant animals moral value.

In a sense, animal rights (AR) evolved out of the concept of animal welfare, which is an old and respected tradition. The first Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) was established in Britain in 1824 to prevent ‘wanton’ abuse of farm and draft animals. It later campaigned against blood sports, vivisection and inhumane slaughter practices. Mostly organized by people from the upper classes, the welfare movement quickly gained popularity and spread through the Western world. By the end of the 19th century SPCAs and Humane Societies had been established in many American cities as well. Still very active today, the animal welfare movement generally seeks to improve conditions for animals. Welfarists believe that animals are capable of pain,
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fear and loneliness. However, they also believe that humans and animals exist in a natural hierarchy and that it is appropriate for humans to use animals in responsible ways. They accept the position of animals in society (used for food, clothes, science, companionship and so on) but argue that animals must be treated as humanely as possible. So while animal rightists and welfarists sometimes cooperate on specific issues, because the welfarists generally don’t acknowledge that animals have rights, there is tension between the two groups.

Deep Ecology

‘Deep Ecology’ has also provided the AR movement with an important foundation. Deep Ecology places high priority on biodiversity, which is the preservation of each and every species on the planet. It recognizes the right of all the elements of nature to exist, regardless of their usefulness to humans. This concept is extremely important for animals because it gives them inherent value independent from human needs and desires. For ecologists, all animals have a key function and are intrinsically valuable.

However, ecologists focus only on the big picture. They don’t study individual animals or even single species in isolation but look at broad patterns and relationships. In this sense, Deep Ecology embraces a fundamentally different philosophy from the AR movement. While AR advocates take seriously the suffering of every individual animal, ecologists are mostly interested in the health of entire ecosystems. They aren’t necessarily concerned about the suffering of individual animals if the population as a whole is healthy.¹

Wildlife conservationists also give priority to vulnerable wild populations. Because domesticated animals are abundant and tend to interfere with natural ecosystems, they are not considered worthy
of protection. In addition, conservationists consider non-sentient life (organisms that aren’t self-aware – plants, for example) to be equally important to the health of ecosystems and don’t necessarily give priority to sentient animals over non-sentient life. For the AR movement an animal’s ability to feel pain or unhappiness is an essential reason why it should have certain rights.²

So while the movement has drawn strength from the animal welfare and Deep Ecology groupings, it differs in significant ways. It puts value on all animals, not just those that comprise ‘nature’, and grants them rights as opposed to just protection.

**Birth of the movement**

Australian-born ethicist Peter Singer is considered by many to be the founder of the animal rights movement. His groundbreaking book, *Animal Liberation*, was first published in 1975. Within a year, the British-based Animal Liberation Front (ALF) had been established, and by the end of the decade several other animal liberation organizations had been created. Hundreds of thousands of copies of the book have been sold and it has been translated into nine languages.³

While animal liberation is not synonymous with animal rights (as will be discussed below), most well-known activists acknowledge that Singer’s work had a profound effect on them.

Singer criticizes ‘speciesism’ (a term coined by his colleague Richard Ryder) – the human readiness to treat a creature of another species in a way that one wouldn’t be willing to treat a member of our own species. Singer believes that attempts to improve conditions for animals are admirable but argues that they are ‘based on quite conventional ways of thinking about the status of animals’.⁴

Essentially, Singer challenges this conventional
thinking by suggesting that because animals are just as capable of suffering as humans, their interests should be given the same consideration as our own. While the welfare movement encourages people to be kind to animals, it doesn’t require humans to give up their domination. It seeks to increase our obligation toward animals, whereas the AR movement insists that animals have moral status.

Singer was not the first to reappraise how we relate to animals, he was simply the first to inspire an international movement. Nearly a century earlier, the British humanitarian Henry Salt called for the equal consideration of humans and animals. Indeed, Singer was inspired by Salt’s work and reprinted his 1892 work Animal Rights, Considered in Relation to Social Progress. Salt was a radical thinker for his time and he dedicated his life to reducing the suffering of humans and non-humans. For Salt, as with many other early animal activists, the plight of oppressed humans was intimately connected with that of animals. He argued that human suffering could not truly be eradicated while animal suffering continued. Through his Humanitarian League, Salt advocated vegetarianism and campaigned for the abolition of vivisection, hunting and the abuse of animals ‘for fashion, in farms, markets and slaughterhouses’.5

Because he rejected the use of animals for human purposes, Salt was much more radical than his peers in the SPCA.

There were other important developments in the 20th century that contributed to the AR movement. A century earlier, some social reformers had rejected the consumption of meat because they believed it contributed to malnutrition among the working class (because meat requires more resources to produce than plant-based foods). By the mid-20th century, vegetarian societies, which rejected meat-eating for ethical reasons, were well-established. Influential
vegetarians like George Bernard Shaw and Mahatma Gandhi advocated a ‘humane diet’ in their circles and to the public at large. The principle of ‘veganism’ – a diet that avoids all animal products, including milk and eggs – was established during the Second World War. While veganism remained uncommon for most of the 20th century, vegetarianism grew after World War Two, was particularly embraced by the counter-culture in the 1960s, and finally reached mass proportions in the 1980s.

But Singer’s book was important because it inspired a cohesive, international movement committed to ending animal exploitation. Scholars such as Ruth Harrison, Stanley and Roslind Godlovitch, John Harris, and Richard Ryder, who had already written about various forms of animal oppression, became much more involved after the publication of Animal Liberation, and people became increasingly aware of the industrialized abuse of animals. Singer’s work also encouraged the publication of hundreds more studies of the treatment of animals in society, the philosophical and legal debates surrounding animal rights, and the development of animal welfare as a scientific field.

**Approaches to animal rights**
The AR movement has various approaches and philosophical bases. Despite his importance to the movement, Singer does not advocate the classic rights position. Rather, he argues that animals should be given equal consideration with humans. Tom Regan, on the other hand, is the architect of the actual animal rights position, which has been adopted by so many activists. Regan argues that animals should hold the same fundamental moral rights as humans.\(^6\)

While Singer believes that the degree of animal suffering in society cannot be justified in terms of how much it benefits humans, Regan believes that any kind
of animal use, even if it is relatively benign, violates animals’ fundamental rights. However, while Singer and Regan’s positions differ philosophically, both consider the exploitation of animals in society to be unjust and have worked to end it.

Another important approach is articulated by Steven Wise, a lawyer who is working to get Great Apes considered as persons under the law. Wise argues that the Great Apes are so similar to humans that it is unjust to deny them legal rights based on their species. Not only do apes share 99 per cent of our DNA, but they are intellectually comparable. Chimpanzees, for example, are cognitively superior to infant humans: they can count, learn human language, make and use tools, and recognize themselves in mirrors.

Like humans, apes are also capable of acts of altruism. They will defend each other, help tend wounds and look after orphaned babies. Other animals, such as elephants and cetaceans (whales, dolphins and porpoises) also share these characteristics. Wise believes that such creatures deserve the same legal protection as humans. He hopes that if the species barrier between humans and our closest living relatives can be transcended, then eventually other animals, even those with fewer ‘human’ qualities, will also be granted rights under the law. Wise teaches animal rights law at Harvard University, and attempts to provide legal representation for animals whose rights he believes have been violated. He hopes that within the next 20 years, apes will be recognized as legal subjects.7

Peter Singer and others have also done this kind of work through the Great Apes Project.

There are thousands of groups around the world working on a variety of issues using very different tactics. Some of the largest and most successful organizations are able to run multiple campaigns, and focus on many aspects of the human/animal relationship.
People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) is probably the most influential international such organization. Established in 1980 by Ingrid Newkirk and Alex Pacheco, it now has almost one million members worldwide. With a staff of over 100 and an annual budget exceeding $25 million, PETA has chapters in the US, the Netherlands, Germany, Britain and India among other countries. It has outreach and education programs, and also conducts investigations and legal proceedings against companies that have low welfare standards.

However, the organization is best known for its controversial advertising campaigns and shock tactics. PETA frequently uses celebrities, nude models and extremely disturbing images to generate interest in animal rights. One of its main strategies has been to publicly shame companies into altering the way they treat animals. It has managed to pressure many corporate giants, like General Motors, Revlon and McDonald’s, into changing their practices. While the organization regularly generates controversy, it is nonetheless extremely professional. Not only does PETA provide thousands of free resources to anyone interested in the issues, but it also provides reams of scientific and professional evidence to support its claims.

Animal liberation

The Animal Liberation Front (ALF) is the most controversial animal rights group, even within the movement itself. Established in Britain in 1976 by Ronnie Lee, it now has branches in the US, Australia, New Zealand/Aotearoa, France, Italy, Spain, Poland, Sweden, South Africa and Canada. ALF members engage in illegal direct action in order to rescue animals and damage facilities that are involved in animal exploitation (such as research facilities, breeding facilities, slaughterhouses and fur
farms). While the ALF rejects the use of violence, it does condone property damage and theft. Its activists argue that they are following a higher moral law when they break property and trespass laws to liberate animals.

‘Over the years, its actions have set free thousands of animals, caused billions of dollars in damage, and exposed some of the worst animal abuses to the public,’ reported The Guardian newspaper. The organization’s activities are funded entirely by individual donors, and to avoid infiltration by the police it has no central organization or coordination. Its activists have been jailed and the FBI considers the organization ‘our highest domestic terrorism investigation priority.’

In both Britain and the US, terrorism laws recently have been amended to target direct action groups like the ALF. These laws make it easier for the State to prosecute and imprison individuals who damage the property to industries that exploit animals. In Australia, however, there is much less stigma attached to the notion of animal liberation. One Australian organization, called Animal Liberation, has eight chapters nationwide. While the organization is not affiliated to the ALF, it nonetheless espouses a radical rights position.

In addition to the hundreds of multi-issue animal

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**Do animal activists care about humans?**

The majority of early reformers who worked to end animal suffering were also active in other forms of philanthropy. Many 19th century suffragettes and abolitionists were active in the anti-vivisection campaign, and some social reformers were involved in promoting animal welfare. This trend has continued into the contemporary period. Studies of donation patterns show that people concerned with animal issues are also concerned with human issues and are likely to donate their money to organizations that help people as well as those that help animals.

rights groups around the world, there are thousands of organizations dedicated to working on single issues, such as animal experimentation, hunting and factory farming. These groups choose to direct their energy to things that affect a large number of animals. As they focus on specific issues, many such groups have had a significant impact on public attitudes.

The emergence of the AR movement has had a radicalizing effect on some of the mainstream animal welfare organizations. The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) and the British Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA), two large and very influential organizations, have changed their positions in the last two decades because of pressure from the movement. While they used to have fairly conservative animal protection policies and tried to avoid challenging industrial uses of animals, they have now come out in support of much more far-reaching measures in all areas of society and the economy. In some respects, their policies are nearly identical to those of the major AR organizations.

This is illustrated by the fact that Robin Webb, a spokesperson for the ALF, was on the board of directors of the RSPCA in the 1990s, while Liz White, an animal rights activist, headed the Toronto Humane Society, the largest in Canada. The radicalization of the animal movement has been a significant development because the large welfare organizations are respected by policy-makers and the public. Welfare groups are considered more respectable and less threatening than AR groups, and are therefore much more likely to influence government policy.

Almost every country has at least one organization that tries to protect animals in one way or another. In many places, particularly in the US, Australia, India, and Western Europe, animal activists are becoming increasingly aware of the ethical limitations of traditional animal welfare and have embraced the
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rights position. The public is becoming increasingly interested in these issues. Just as politically conscious people have become educated about the exploitative labor practices and environmental degradation inherent in the global economic system, they are also starting to question industrial animal exploitation, which has steadily increased in the last 50 years.