

Carnivore, Omnivore, Vegan: The Hardest Questions

Legal Affairs

May/June 2003

by Ted Kerasote

Time of the big light-long dusks,
short nights, early mornings. June.

Merle the golden dog, Tinker the
sorrel horse, and Ted the Caucasian
man gallop across the hay fields in
front of their house, between the
Teton and Gros Ventre mountains,
under the wide Wyoming sky,
turning to violet.

The man has worked all day at
his desk, writing, making phone
calls, balancing a checkbook, and
likes the wind in his face, the horse
stretched out between his legs so
they feel like one
creature. The horse has eaten
hay, dozed, attacked the horses
beneath him in the corral's pecking
order, ran from those above him.
He's glad to be out, on the move,
running where he wants to, the
man's hand on his neck, his voice
in his ear, "Your go." The dog has
visited the other members of his
dog community, played chase-me-
and-I'll-chase-you-until-we're-
so-tired-we'll-all-sleep-in-a-heap,
barked at ravens, slept by the man's
desk, and is now overjoyed to be
with his best buddy, doing what he
was made to do: run.

After a mile, the horse slows down
exactly as he broke into a gallop:

on his own accord. The man
dismounts, takes off the horse's
headstall and bridle, and lets him
graze. Out of sight from the road,
buried in sky and swamped by
grass, the man lies down, hands
behind his head, the dog leaning
against his side, and takes a nap.

When he wakes, the sun has long
since set behind the Tetons but the
valley is lit by the reflected glow of
the sky. The man has woken with
the sense of being watched, and
sure enough, just thirty yards off, a
coyote sits, gazing at the horse, the
man, the dog.

The man and the coyote make
eye contact and hold it for a few
seconds before the coyote walks a
little closer, not in a straight line,
but in an arc, first away then closer.
Twenty yards.

At that moment, Mede, the sleeping
dog, wakes and sees the coyote.
Before the man's hand can dart
to the dog's neck, the dog hurtles
toward his wild cousin. Standing,
the man sees the two disappear in
the tall grass. He calls the horse,
bridles him, mounts, and rides in
the direction of the two canids.

Within two hundred yards, he sees

his dog returning, followed now by
two coyotes, only ten yards behind.
The three dogs seem easy with
each other and in a moment prove
it. Merle turns and lopes after the
coyotes, who without fear turn and
let him chase them for about fifty
yards. They then turn and begin to
chase. Merle, who sets off with a
little hop and a shake of his head,
both of which seem to say, "Ha
ha, this is fun." He lets the coyotes
chase him for a hundred or so
yards before exchanging roles and
becoming the chaser. The coyotes
saunter, exhibiting the same sort of
golly-this-is-fun lope.

The horse and man break into a
canter, catch the dog, and ride
alongside him. Suddenly, the
two coyotes turn and come at the
threesome. The man turns the horse
and lets the coyotes chase them
for a while, then the horse, man,
and dog trot after them. The two
groups, chasers and chased, make
big circles under the darkening sky.
Then the coyotes drift farther and
farther northwest, and finally the
horse, man, and dog turn slowly
and trot toward home.

Unable to transmit with complete
accuracy how the horse and dog
felt about this evening, I shall
speak only for myself. A person
need have only a few of these
interspecies experiences
to know that the creatures of the
world are far more complex than
most of us imagine. In fact, if
you spend enough time outside
watching animals, you have to
admit that they behave much as we
do; and-not only do they behave
as we do, but they have emotional
lives quite similar to our own.

We (both human and nonhuman

animals) like to play, we get scared, we love our mates and offspring (sometimes only temporarily), we can be altruistic and compassionate, make practical jokes, enjoy beautiful views, appreciate thoughtfulness in others, revenge wrongdoing, feel shame, be mean, ornery, and even psychopathic, and prefer not to die. Which is the whole point of Jeffrey Masson and Susan McCarthy's book, *When Elephants Weep: The Emotional Lives of Animals*. In short, say the two authors, human and nonhuman animals, particularly mammals, are quite alike.

Sympathetic observers of nature, as well as those who keep pets, have known this for thousands of years. Scientists, on the other hand, have been very reluctant to grant animals the emotional makeup of humans. This has led to all sorts of horrible ends: René Descartes, the supreme rationalist, conceiving of animals as machines; vivisectionists nailing live dogs to boards by their four paws and cutting them open to examine the circulation of their blood; modern Cartesians dropping irritants into rabbits' eyes so that we can have safe cosmetics; and the domestic meat industry piling chickens and pigs into giant growing factories that resemble nothing so much as concentration camps.

To refute this sort of thinking, Masson and McCarthy fill their book with examples of how animals behave as we do: An elephant helps a young rhino stuck in the mud; a herd of zebras, having already escaped a pack of wild dogs, return to rescue three of their members; an irascible parrot, treated well, becomes

friendly. These and hundreds of other anecdotes culled from the literature of field biologists present a compelling case for what Charles Darwin noted: The animal kingdom is united by similar behavior and like sentiment. Unlike Darwin, Masson and McCarthy use their evidence to segue into a discussion of animal rights.

Their last chapter reviews the history of the animal-welfare movement. In 1789, Jeremy Bentham, speaking of animals, said, "The question is not, Can they *reason*? nor, Can they *talk*? But, Can they *suffer*?" In the 1970s, Peter Singer wrote *Animal Liberation*, in which he suggests that sentience, the ability to feel pain, demands that we give equal consideration to the interests of all creatures who possess this quality. In the 1980s, Tom Regan wrote *The Case for Animal Rights*, where he argues that society needs to protect the rights of animals who have a "life story," who are "capable of being the subject of a life."

Masson and McCarthy close this brief account and their call for more compassionate behavior toward animals with one of the Western world's most heartwarming stories of interspecies connection, Androcles and the lion. Androcles, a slave, was brought into the great circus at Rome to be torn to bits by lions. From across the arena, one of the gigantic cats saw him and stopped short in amazement. Approaching the man slowly, he came closer and closer, wagging his tail, and eventually licked the man's feet and hands. The lion and the man then exchanged a joyful greeting. The emperor Caligula, wanting to

know why the lion had spared the man, had the slave brought before him. Androcles told him how he had run away from his master and hidden in a cave in the desert. A lion came into the cave, moaning because of a huge splinter in his paw. Spying Androcles, the lion didn't attack. Instead, he lifted his paw in a pleading gesture. Androcles took out the splinter, and in gratitude the lion lay down by his side and they fell asleep together. For three years thereafter they shared the cave, the lion hunting for both of them. Then Androcles was recaptured, sent to Rome, and condemned to death in the circus. Caligula was so moved by Androcles's story that he freed him as well as the lion, allowing them to walk the streets of Rome together.

Whether you believe the details of the story is immaterial. The point is that for three years the lion fed himself and Androcles by hunting other animals—animals who had mates and offspring, felt fear and pain, and more than likely didn't want to die to keep the good lion and the compassionate Androcles going.

Much to Masson and McCarthy's credit, *When Elephants Weep* is not a one-sided book that paints nature as some happy Eden. They discuss warfare among chimpanzees, rape among waterfowl, and revenge in orcas. But they never venture into the really mucky ground that the story of Androcles and the lion raises; namely, if animals and humans are emotionally very similar, and animals can eat each other, is it wrong for humans also to eat animals?

To defect this question' as many

animal welfarists do, with the argument that humans have a conscience and guilt and therefore should treat animals with a hands-off compassion nullifies the original proposition, which is that animals and humans are alike and so need to be treated similarly. It pulls humans out of nature to defend an ethical stance - in this case animal welfare - and separates humans from nature as surely as the vivisectionists do. Since Masson and McCarthy never address this question - if animals kill for food, why can't humans do likewise? - I'll offer what I think their carefully thought-out answer might be. A dolphin or an orca doesn't have a choice: It must eat fish or sea lions or it will die. Humans, on the other hand, are omnivores. They can eat fish or sea lions or goose-liver paté, but they can also survive quite nicely on tofu.

For most animal welfarists, this makes the question of whether humans can ethically eat animals or use them for utilitarian ends an open-and-shut case. Because we have choice in our diets, we should not kill animals for food. Vegetarianism, including clothing and household products, therefore becomes the least-harm way to live.

And it very well may be. My purpose is not to defend the vegan way of life or to trounce it but to open its modus operandi for deeper inspection. In the process, I hope that we might understand our place in nature with more clarity.

Foremost when thinking about vegetarianism, we must acknowledge the animal lives lost as agribusiness churns out our

supermarket vegetables. Rodents, snakes, and birds are poisoned, displaced, and gobbled up by combines as rye, oats, wheat, and soybeans are grown and harvested. Large mammals such as wolves, bears, caribou, and moose are also displaced from the oil fields that fuel farm machinery. Marine life and waterfowl are then killed in oil spills as petroleum products are transported.

These deaths, many animal welfarists will point out, are not perpetrated consciously by the vegan consumer. They are externalities - lamentable and demanding to be eliminated. Yet even as we improve agricultural technologies and slowly turn from fossil fuels, millions of people still need to be fed, and wasted animal lives happen to be one of the costs of modern agriculture. To avoid these costs, we, consumers, can try to buy only organic food, locally grown, or grow it ourselves. This is a conscientious alternative to the supermarket, but it too has costs that must be tallied. I will use a personal example.

When I turn over my garden with a pitchfork or hoe, I frequently impale earthworms, which for many people do not have a "life story" in the way animal-rights philosophers understand that term. In fact, to *Animal Liberation*, Peter Singer places sentience someplace around the level of a mollusk and probably wouldn't grant it to an earthworm. I'm sure Singer wouldn't consciously kill earthworms, but he doesn't give them the same standing as mammals or birds. Yet when I see earthworms writhing on the end of my pitchfork, their

reaction does not seem to me to be mere neural response. To speak of an earthworm's writhing in such language reminds me of cartesian vivisectionists perceiving dogs as "clockworks," so that when they were cut open and howled in agony their cries were understood to be merely the "screech of their inner springs."

If elephants can weep, and chimpanzees laugh, and orioles feel pride at their songs, and dogs howl when they're lacerated, do not earthworms feel pain when stuck with a pitchfork? Do they not have an "earthworm life story," obscure and hidden as it may be to us and the rest of the animal kingdom? And isn't their loss of those stories a cost to weigh against the growing of my organic potatoes? For me, the logic of leaving nature without boundaries of sentience - of investing everyone with the recognition of pain - seems inescapable. Indeed, we are just coming around as a culture, grudgingly and with discomfort, to acknowledging a truth known by cultures that lived closer to the land: Everything is invested with feeling.

Not only do animals not like to die to become another animal's food, but one might make the case, as gathering-hunting cultures have, that trees don't like to be cut for firewood, and when they are they need to be propitiated. Last year, when I moved the stones at the site of my new house to make room for the foundation, I did it with some uneasiness, placing them in new locations with small apologies, hearing John Muir speak words that I had once read but was now feeling: "Why may not even a mineral arrangement of matter be endowed with sensation of a

kind that we in our blind exclusive perfection can have no manner of communication with?"

So then, if everyone has feelings - animals, plants, stones - what do we do? How do we move through the world without leaving a wake of suffering? There seem to be three choices, none of which actually alleviates suffering. Rather, each life plan chooses to deal with the pain of other beings in a different way.

The first life plan ignores the pain of others by ignoring all the evidence pointing to the fact that animals feel as we do. It splits humans and nature, putting us in the dominant role. Nature is for our use, it does not feel what we feel, and so we can do just about anything we care to do so long as we're good managers and get a sustained yield.

The second life plan joins humans and nature but draws a distinct line of sentience through it: higher animals have the ability to suffer, lower animals and plants do not, which leaves them open to be used for human food and shelter. Those who choose this life plan can often ignore the real flesh-and-blood animals who die as a result of agricultural practices because those deaths are over the horizon and caused by someone else.

The third life plan joins humans with all of nature, every last bit of it, from the stellar flakes of a geode to the stellar orbs in the heaven, from amoebas to aardvarks. Those who are committed to this sort of joining often experience a profound uneasiness over the question of who dies so others may live.

Another personal example may illustrate this choice. To build my house, I cut standing dead lodge pole pine trees, removing the future homes of sapsuckers and black bears. I could have built a straw-bale home, which in some building circles is considered a more conscientious and ecologically sound structure, but I would have then participated in the slaughter of small-animal populations as the hay was cut with machinery. If I were really conscientious and cut all the hay by hand, I still would have exposed the mice and voles to the sky, causing more of them to be eaten by red-tailed hawks than if the hay had remained uncut. Would I then be culpable for their deaths? I believe I would. Just as I when I drive my car and hit butterflies or bluebirds or Uinta ground squirrels or, every once in a while, a deer, I am responsible for their deaths. There is hardly a motorist on the continent who hasn't participated in this slaughter. A truly caring person would not drive an automobile at all.

The inescapable fact is that in one shape, form, or guise, virtually all of us (mammals, birds, fish, insects, and so on) kill other beings for food, for shelter, or to get from one place to another. We all kill other beings who have - some more, some less - emotions like ours and life stories ranging from one-liners to novels.

How we do this killing, how we permit others to do it for us, where we draw our lines between kingdoms and species, and what kinds of grace we say for the lives that keep us going define how we live out these hardest questions: Why did life evolve

based on the death of others? Why is corporeal existence so ephemeral? Why do some of us depart our earthly skins sooner than others, leaving those who cared and loved for us in tears, or in whatever stare expresses grief in those beings who don't have lachrymal glands.

If you want to stay in the game - meaning that you decide not to commit suicide and exempt yourself from all future killing - there isn't a single good strategy that lets you live without inflicting some harm. Neither carnivorousness, omnivorousness, or vegetarianism are adequate solutions, nor is being an organic farmer, a careful livestock grower, or an aboriginal hunter-gatherer. Some life plans, of course, are more clear_sighted than others. Whichever we choose, we can try to take gently those lives that support us, offering thanks for their gifts, and rejoicing often that we are given another day.