

Welfarism and Liberation

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Does working for or supporting welfare measures harm the longer-term goal of bringing about liberation? See also: "A Single Step" by Peter Singer and Bruce Friedrich.

Expanding the Floor of the Cage

The Brazilian Landless Farmers movement has a slogan: "Expand the floor of the cage before you try to break out." It is a way of saying that activists should try to improve the status quo in order to have more room in which to work towards a permanent solution. This belief -- that one can support efforts that improve welfare and increase awareness while working for liberation -- marks one position within the animal liberation movement, and is characterized by achievements such as McDonald's recent agreement to improve the treatment of chickens and possibly other animals. Another common position is summarized as "rights first, rights only, rights über alles."

The Lessons of History: If Abolitionists had been Absolutists

While we all understand the desire to embrace and advocate pure-vegan ideals, this shouldn't stop us from studying the history of social movements and reevaluating our tactics. Successful social movements -- abolitionism, the women's suffrage movement, the civil rights movement, the gay rights movement -- have pushed for reforming the current system while working towards ultimate goals.

For example, take abolitionism and the subsequent civil rights movement in the U.S. They were built through successive improvements in the standing of black Americans. Each improvement, each piecemeal reform, elevated the status of blacks and brought greater confidence and experience to organizers, allowing them to fight for further entitlements. If the movement had rejected all reforms, it's unlikely that it ever could have built enough momentum to succeed. Imagine if Frederick Douglass had argued "Equal voting rights or no rights at all. Equal representation in government and business, or no representation at all." Imagine if Lincoln had refused to issue the Emancipation Proclamation because it didn't guarantee an end to prejudice or segregation. Douglass, Lincoln, and others were cognizant enough of political realities to see that such positions would alienate the mass of the population, condemning abolition to failure.

The same fate awaits any movement that does not seize reforms and strive to educate when opportunities arise. Absolutist movements attract only those already converted to the cause, and remain confined to a small cadre of dedicated but isolated activists. By settling for "nothing short of total liberation," many groups have condemned themselves to acrimonious anonymity and burnout. They cut themselves off from consideration by the public, and do not provide any incentive for change within the animal industries.

More diverse organizations, on the other hand, have attracted broad memberships of vegetarians and nonvegetarians. They achieve results because they can reach out to those who may not share all of their opinions, and are willing to work with businesses. These results, in turn, bring in new activists who gain confidence and experience. We should recognize, then, that individuals, businesses, and society progress towards a more compassionate ethic gradually, through successive stages of increased concern for animals.

"It must get worse before it gets better"

Some advocates argue that animal liberation is a unique social justice goal, and oppose welfare reforms because they believe people will choose not to go vegan if they learn that animals are being treated "better." For example, if the public hears that McDonald's will be getting their eggs from producers that keep their laying hens in bigger cages and no longer force-molt them, fewer people will alter their purchasing patterns than had the agreement not been reached and publicized.

Although this argument may seem to have a certain logic, the evidence indicates that reforms draw the attention of nonvegetarians to the issue, persuading many to reconsider their ethics and actions. Animal groups then use their victories to gain visibility and push for further reforms. In this way, welfare measures tend to be a slippery slope toward abolition, not away from it.

European countries -- particularly the United Kingdom -- are a counterexample to the "it must get worse before it gets better" argument. Animals are treated far better there and vegetarianism is more widespread. There are more vegetarian restaurants, and nonvegetarian restaurants have more vegetarian options. The advances in animal welfare have given both the UK welfare and abolition movements confidence and momentum. And the attention paid to animal welfare in business practices and legislation has increased the public's interest in how their food is produced.

The same could become true in the US. Reforming a company like McDonald's can initiate a domino effect throughout the industry. Competitors now have a greater incentive to match and exceed McDonald's reforms, thereby forcing industrywide improvements in the living and dying conditions for all animals. No company wants to be singled out as the "cruel one" by a widespread and well-supported campaign.

More importantly, when the industries that rely on animal exploitation raise the issue of humane treatment, it receives far more serious consideration from the public than animal advocates and partisans could ever hope to achieve alone. Once the companies themselves grant that animals have interests, it becomes harder to justify using them for food, regardless of specific conditions.

We have sympathy for those who believe McDonald's is the "enemy," and claim we have to "destroy them". But McDonald's is simply the embodiment of consumer demand. Vilifying a faceless corporate entity as the antagonist distracts from what should be the core concern -- the suffering of animals -- and from the root cause of this suffering -- the choices of consumers.

Obviously, McDonald's is not going to become vegan tomorrow. In the meantime, we can help lessen animals' suffering by supporting reforms and consumer education while simultaneously advancing abolition by promoting veganism. If we target nonvegan companies no matter what, they have no incentive to change their farming practices or add more vegan alternatives to their menus. This leads to more suffering, and more difficulty in people going veg.

Purity or Progress

Why else would we not support welfare reforms? Perhaps so as not to "compromise our principles." But this isn't the case unless our guiding principle is "Never, under any circumstances, work with nonvegan people or businesses." Why would someone hold that principle above all else, especially when it is at odds with another that seems more fundamental and defensible: "Work to reduce animal suffering"?

Of course, this is not to say that everyone should pursue welfarist measures. We believe that the way to lessen the most suffering in the most expedient and efficacious manner is to promote vegetarianism and veganism.

Conclusions

If you were being tortured 24 hours a day in a prison cell, would you want an absolutist on your side? Would you ask that no one on the outside try to stop your torture because it has to be "freedom or nothing at all"? Would you believe that the worse your treatment and the greater your suffering, the closer you would be to freedom? Or would you prefer that someone bring to light your circumstances and enact reforms that could significantly reduce your suffering, while also working toward your liberation? While our ultimate goal is to end animal exploitation, we must support the reduction of suffering as much as possible along the way. We should encourage any action that will help animals, even if all it does is make their lives a bit less miserable or their deaths a bit less cruel. We don't stop there, of course, but we can't pass up the chance to make improvements for animals simply because it's not enough.