Sex Roles, Companion Animals--and Something More

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But some judgmental and moralizing organizations are now using religion to further their purely political ends. They would have the teaching of evolution, of ecology, of egalitarian animal rights philosophy banished from our schools. And they would replace thoughtful inquiry into society’s religious and political values with a simplistic and moralizing conformity, which is promoted under the guise of religious instruction.

Nevertheless, there are some religious groups that are comprised of legitimately spiritual individuals. They do not use their tenets to further some gratuitous political ideology, nor do they invoke bogeymen such as the devil, the communist or capitalist threat. They do not speak exclusively to God and country but, instead, of God, nature, and humanity. These people perceive God as love, not as some moralistic judge, or a patriarch remote and above us, and we, correspondingly, above nature and the animals. For they recognize that God created us as much in His image, as in theirs (Genesis 1:26): to consider otherwise is an un-Christian form of the Greek hubris, or sheer vanity (Ecclesiastes 3:19). And to stand in moral judgment of others is un-Christian arrogance.

Yet when the ethical fabric of society is being frayed by the supposed forces of “evil” (ignorance, insensitivity, and indifference) and we begin to feel threatened by such political ideologies as totalitarian communism and corporate socialism or, on the other hand, by the potentially atheistic, amoral, and secular mindset of pure scientific empiricism and technologically based imperialism, then all religious and spiritually enlightened people of the world should feel morally compelled to act responsibly and with enlightened self-interest to oppose such forces. Not by casting stones, or by judging others, but by living courageously, lovingly, and ethically serving the greater good of society only when such good is consonant with the rights of other peoples, nations, and animals, as well as the environment as a whole. But when the good of any nation (or interest group) violates such rights, its claim to unquestioned righteousness under the “one nation under God” principle is invalidated. Those persons who purport to be religious are surely right only when they use religion to further the politics of an ecological, racial, and species egalitarianism that is based upon cooperation, a sharing of resources and respect for each other’s interests and rights; and a reverence for the sanctity and dignity of all life, animal and human alike; in brief, a co-creative stewardship of the planet Earth.

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One of the fundamental convictions that motivates our publication of the Journal is that science, and the scientific method, can furnish animal welfare advocates and activists with the exact kind of testable, empirical data that must remain the primary tools of persuasion in a rational society. Precisely because animals cannot speak for themselves, and cannot tell us whether, for example, they prefer a solid concrete or a slatted floor, we can make good use of the carefully controlled techniques of classical science to derive “best guesses” about what kinds of environments foster their well-being. These may include direct methods such as structured observation and choice tests, or indirect methods such as monitoring of blood levels of stress-induced hormones like adrenocorticoids.

What’s fascinating about these kinds of well-controlled scientific studies is that more than our preconceptions about animals may fall by the wayside once we pursue the results; other standardized myths about, for example, sex roles, may come into question as well.

As a case in point, several recent articles about how men and women relate to dogs and cats furnish us with some basic lessons about how we interact with our animal companions. But, in the process, they also shed some interesting light on the precariousness of our beliefs about differences in the sexes. Finally, they provide vital instruction concerning some of the classic foibles that are inherent in the use of some kinds of scientific methods.

First, let’s take a look at one way two researchers looked at how people think about dogs and cats. An earlier issue of the Journal (4(1):17, 1983) reported on the survey results compiled by two Missouri researchers, who queried over 900 individuals on their opinions of companion animals. Their analysis of the data showed that, among other things, “women become more emotionally involved with their animals and derive a greater sense of security from pet ownership (with both dogs and cats) than do men.” Now, this is the sort of result that you might have expected yourself, if you simply walked around the room at a party and queried the attendees about their emotions vis-a-vis dogs and cats. In either case, this method, self-reporting, is well recognized as unavoidably incorporating a sizeable dose of the interviewee’s own bias; in other words, people tend to an-
The State of the Economy and Animal Welfare

Michael W. Fox

The economic depression affects more than just the human population. Unemployed people find it harder to feed their pets, and so animal shelters in depressed areas must take in more than their usual burden of dogs for adoption and destruction. Cases of animal neglect and cruelty increase as families disintegrate environmentally. The increased incidence of animal and child abuse is one tragic consequence of economic and psychological depression.

The hungry and disemployed in the cities have, at least, their soup lines, but not so for those in the depressed rural areas. Here, trapping of furbearers, such as muskrat and raccoon, is on the upswing, as is the hunting and poaching of deer. The negative impact on the environment of this trend is further intensified by the increased incidence of economic necessity, not only lacking enlightened self-interest, but is also providing the critical impetus for its own eventual nemesis. Hence, there is an even greater need today for humane education and the promulgation of animal welfare principles and the animal and environmental rights philosophies. However, we see that “economic recovery,” improved farm and laboratory animal welfare, and environmental quality are considered as exclusive and even contradictory goals under the present administration. But can we continue to pay the ever-higher costs of sacrificing environmental quality and animals’ welfare in order to promote the tunnel-vision goal of industrial “recovery”?

The United States’ aggressive competition in the world agricultural market can mean a further decrement in farm animal welfare and environmental protection standards, just so we can gain a competitive edge over other countries. Similar economic incentives also mean that more animals are being trapped for their fur for export; more are used in biomedical research to find profitable “cures;” and more deadly pesticides are being developed for sale abroad. The State Department is even considering lifting restrictions on the export of some human drugs and agrochemicals that have been judged too hazardous to have been used in this country.

In conclusion, the present economic situation is eroding the ethical principles of egalitarian democracy. But at the same time, its sad effect on animals is also stimulating greater concern for animal rights and welfare, and environmental protection. People are coming to realize that animal, human, and environmental well-being are inseparable and interconnected. An economy and industrial system that ignores these spiritual, ethical, and ecological interconnections will suffer the consequence: industrial self-destruction.