

Speciesism: Alive and Well

By Edward S. Duvin

Speciesism: the belief in the inherent superiority of one species over another.

To many of us, fighting this bias is the principal reason we became involved in the animal liberation movement, but this quest for a larger vision of family has yet to take hold among our own ranks – much less the public.

The continuing debate over companion animals is a frightening example of our movement's propensity to engage in selective morality, applying different standards to various species. Billions of farm animals suffer terribly each year, but no one would suggest that our movement take over meat-packing plants to operate them more humanely. Instead, we use our energy to vigorously protest the meat-based agriculture system that injures nonhumans and humans alike. With companion animals, however, society uses and abuses them for profit and pleasure, and our movement obligingly operates the slaughterhouses to dispose of the "throwaways."

Instead of recognizing our movement's historical and contemporary role in this holocaust, many leaders continue to rationalize it on the basis of a "humane" death being preferable to a "miserable" life – further arguing that we are best able to provide this "merciful" end. Desperate humans are grievously suffering by the tens of millions all over the world, but who can imagine relief agencies endorsing systematic euthanasia as an acceptable policy. A vastly different ethic applies for companion animals,



however, and most of our movement remains silent.

The key word is "suffering," as a generation of humane leaders were taught that any act – even killing millions of healthy beings – was compassionate if, in their infinite wisdom, it prevented further suffering. To buffer this arrogant and anthropomorphic position, they label those who philosophically and ethically challenge them as insensitive to animals starving or spending years in a cage.

Let no one think that I'm embracing animal "collectors," as these troubled individuals are unable to take proper care of themselves – let alone other beings; however, when Bentham posed the crucial question as to whether animals can suffer, he hardly had mass killing in mind as an antidote to prevent that suffering!

I have written ad infinitum that the salient issue is not suffering, but a deadly form of human ignorance that presumes "killing them kindly" is preferable to what we all face: a life fraught with uncertainties, grave risks, and anguish – as none of us escapes alive from this earth. All sentient beings – both wild and domesticated – suffer interminably and were we to presume that suffering is the preeminent criterion for living or dying, then the human species would vanish in a fortnight. As Pope Leo XIII reminded us, "To suffer and to endure is the lot of humanity."

No sane person wants to see humans or nonhumans suffer – least of all those of us

in life-affirming movements – and certainly there comes a time, such as with the incurably ill, when many people believe euthanasia is a desirable option ... myself among them. However, that is fundamentally different from one species determining the fate of another species by a standard it does not apply to itself.

Deciding that death for other beings is preferable to a risk-filled life is not euthanasia in its traditional form, but rather a lethal manifestation of speciesism that projects our own fears and values onto another species, and then proclaims – as though we were omniscient gods – that death is our loving “gift” to them.

We have no right to condemn healthy companion animals based on our limited understanding of their realities, as our mission should be exactly the same as children’s advocates: Establish more temporary safe havens, find additional permanent homes, and, most importantly, develop programs that reduce the number of homeless.

Do countless children suffer for many years trapped in overcrowded and substandard orphanages? Of course, as do refugees and millions upon millions of other displaced people, and this suffering is a horrendous tragedy. However, compassionate people seek to remedy these problems through addressing the fundamental causes, not killing the victims – and that’s what our movement should have been doing since Bergh founded the first SPCA in 1866.

If any of our movement’s leaders were locked in a tiny cell for many months, facing a precarious future, what would they prefer for themselves and their loved ones: a merciful death or enduring the terror and suffering in hopes of being released? Is

there any doubt that, regardless of the risks, they would take any chance to survive over a quick and certain death – the same chance so readily denied to millions of homeless companion animals? Schweitzer’s “will-to-live,” which exists in all life forms, is being desecrated by our movement in the name of “kindness.”

A recent issue of the leading shelter publication spared no effort in denigrating progressive programs to support feral cats. The thrust of this dogmatic criticism was that euthanasia is preferable to neuter-and-release programs, claiming such programs expose ferals to the risk of “terrifying lives and tragic deaths.” Here again, we see the “kill, kill, kill” mentality – arrogantly presuming that certain death is a kinder fate for ferals than uncertain life. How ironic, as Thoreau pointed out, that the most desperate lives are lived quietly by humans, and yet no one is euthanizing us for our own protection!

The editor-in-chief of *Animals’ Voice* magazine wrote the following in Volume 3, Number 5: “So shame is what we feel. Shame for having taken so long to recognize our own failure, as an animal rights publication, in accepting the companion animal plight as our highest priority of animal issues: it’s the only one we can guarantee will end because we – animal defenders – are the ones doing it.”

Shame is also what I feel ... shame for being part of a movement that passively tolerates the institutionalized slaughter of healthy and precious beings – and then proudly defends the slaughter by asserting “it’s for their own good.” The killing is clearly not for their good, but rather a means for our movement and the public to avoid responsibility for ending overpopu-

lation. Mass killing “manages” an animal control problem for society, but only a morally bankrupt movement would participate in this madness.

Yes, progress has been made the last few years, but at an agonizingly slow pace. Protest, petition, do whatever you can to pressure status quo humane societies and SPCAs to say, “Enough! We categorically reject the practice of loving our friends to death.” Our society will never stop the murderous breeding until we raise the price of that breeding by refusing to act as executioners. If we are not willing to take some risks for life, then this movement is a pale shadow of its noble rhetoric. Healthy companion animals deserve more from us than “gentle” deaths, and those who continue to rationalize “killing them kindly” bear responsibility for perpetuating the obscene slaughter. If as much energy had been expended to stop the breeding as it has been on controlling and killing the excess, the holocaust would long ago have ended.

If past experience serves as a guide, many will view these words as unfairly harsh and critical. Viewed in the face of hundreds of millions of healthy dogs and cats destroyed in this century, my criticism is overly genteel. During the past few years, I have witnessed more anger from the Shelter Establishment directed at critics than the grotesque slaughter, and this sorrowful lack of priority and proportion is indicative of a malignancy in the soul of our movement.

The salient question is: How did we ever buy into the “homeless equals suffering equals killing equals kindness” rationale? Normally, if the protector of other beings

became the executioner, people of conscience would vehemently protest until this aberration was corrected. That didn’t happen in our movement, however, because the concept of animal liberation hadn’t been established yet – and “clean cages” and “merciful death” was the prevailing definition of compassion for shelter animals.

With the advent of the animal liberation movement, this “welfarist” mentality was challenged by those touting the “rights” of nonhumans. As it turned out, though, this liberation ethic never reached companion animals. Why? There weren’t any “bad guys” to take issue with, as the majority of companion animals were dying in our own shelters.

So we railed at furriers, animal farmers, hunters, vivisectors, and all the rest for killing healthy beings, but humane societies and SPCAs weren’t held accountable for finding nonlethal solutions to overpopulation because they were us. Animal rights activists looked the other way, and this “free pass” given to shelters set the stage for companion animals to be the forgotten species of the animal liberation movement.

How revealing that our adversaries recognize the hypocrisy of this tragic omission, but we continue to wear incestuous blinders when it comes to double standards in our own movement. The American Trapper stated that our movement’s “expertise is, quite simply, the killing of the overabundance of pets. Nothing more.” Who can deny the hideous reality that we take more lives each year in our shelters than we save in our other noble pursuits!

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What our movement refuses to see is that the killing only serves to perpetuate the tragedy, as it eliminates the need for society to find compassionate, nonlethal alternatives. Had we repudiated the killing of healthy beings for population control as forcefully as we stigmatized fur, comprehensive breeding restriction ordinances would be commonplace across the country – lifted only as individual communities reached zero killing. Why should the public take the slaughter seriously when those who speak for animals are operating the slaughterhouses?

Regardless of the legal name on SPCA and humane society shelters, each of our names appears on these buildings – and, due to our silent complicity, we are all morally culpable for the stacks of bodies. That silence can no longer continue. Either our

movement joins together to end this insanity, or we continue being angels of death masquerading in humane clothing.

This article was originally published in Animals' Voice in 1990. Ed Duvin, often referred to as the "father" of the no-kill movement, is known for his writing and public speaking on the humane movement and other social change movements, as well as his extensive nonprofit consulting. Ed has served as the associate director of In Defense of Animals, the driving force behind the creation of the Center for Respect of Life and Environment, and founder of Project ZERO (which is committed to achieving a new ethic for companion animals) and Walking the Walk (which promotes management standards).