

Trumpeter (1993)
ISSN: 0832-6193
Do Animals Have Rights

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Trumpeter

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“Rights” as a Human Notion

A “right” is a legalistic, human construct based on some moral sense of privilege. A “right” is defined by humans and assigned by humans to humans and therefore does not apply to animals unless we purposely give specifically-recognized rights to animals. “Rights,” as defined and granted by humans to one another, are based on some notion that one species, race, color, creed, sex, or age is superior to another, which means that differences and similarities of anything are based on our subjective judgments about whatever those appearances are. In our society, for example, men are judged more capable in most kinds of work than are women, because society has placed more value on certain kinds of products, those demanding such masculine attributes as linear thinking and physical strength as opposed to those demanding such feminine attributes as cyclic thinking and physical gentleness.

These differences in perceived outer (superficial) values therefore became social judgments about the inherent (real) values of individual human beings, as well as other forms of life. Superficial characteristics are therefore translated into special rights or privileges simply because the individuals are different in some aspects and either perform certain actions differently or perform different actions. The more different a form of life is to ourselves the more likely we are to make black-and-white judgments about its perceived real value as expressed through our notion of its rights.

Such judgments are made against the personal standards we use to measure how everything around us fits into our comfort zone. We thus judge this person good and that one bad or this animal good and that one bad, depending on how they conform to our standard of acceptability. Such judgments are erroneous, however, because all one can ever judge is appearances. In addition, each person’s standard is correct only to that person; it is not valid for anyone else.

The most extreme example of personal judgments is the use of superficial differences to justify a social end in such a way that one group of human beings declares itself superior to another group because it wants what the other group has. Throughout the world, the “civilized” peoples of a country, usually invaders at some time in history, such as the Europeans in North, Central, and South America, see indigenous peoples as subhuman—only a little above the animals with whom they share the habitat.

Invaders display this extreme attitude because if they regard the indigenous peoples as equals they obviously could not justify conquering them and forcibly stealing their land, especially when such action means exterminating an entire culture. The conquered, therefore, must be deemed inferior, even subhuman.

There may be a number of judgmental reasons for these discrepancies in social stature, but none of them can be applied in the context of the real value of each person. An appropriate analogy might be the spokes of a wheel. Each spoke is slightly different and seemingly independent of the others; yet each is equal in importance to the functioning of the wheel. Each spoke is connected at the center of the wheel and at the outer rim. Leave out one spoke and the strength and function of the wheel is to that extent diminished, although the effect might not be immediately made apparent.

Each person has a gift to give and each gift is unique and critical to the whole. The gifts are equal and different. What is true for human beings is true for every living thing on Earth, because every living thing is equal in its service to the Earth. Each species, each life, each function is equally important to the evolutionary success of our home planet— whether we understand it or not. Each species has its own excellence and cannot be compared to any other. All differences among all living things are just that—differences. The hierarchies or judgmental levels of value are human constructs that have nothing whatsoever to do with reality. Every life is a practice in evolution, and every living thing is equal before God.

Thus, we must discard our view of the Earth as a battlefield of subjective competition where human “superiority” reigns. We will be better off if we consider the Earth in terms of complementary efforts in which no living thing is better or worse than any other. Each is only different and in its own way is equally important to the health and well being of the whole living system because life demands struggle and tenacity, which continually fits and refits each living thing to its function. If the equality of differences is true, in what way must we participate with Nature?

The Way We Participate With Nature

The things we tend to remember the clearest and the longest are those in which we’ve been forced by circumstances to participate most fully with our environment, when it seems Nature has chosen to participate with us. Such times are usually when we’re out of control and terribly uncomfortable, such as being caught in an earthquake or intense storm. These are the times of our greatest aliveness, when we’re forced to deal first hand with the raw power of the Eternal to mold and sculpt the Universe.

The way in which we choose to participate with Nature, on the other hand,

depends on how we see ourselves in relation to other forms of life, especially to animals. If we think ourselves superior to all life forms, we can do nothing but subjugate all life to feed our egos. But if we see ourselves as equal to but different from other species, then we can allow and encourage each to fulfill its function in the evolution of our home planet.

When “Helping” Is Interfering

We must honor the integrity of animals as part of the sacred evolution of Nature. But we must consciously decide when our notion of helping animals actually interferes with the integrity of their naturalness, when our attempts to rescue animals really interferes with the sacred evolution of Nature’s processes.

Humans often rush to the aid of wildlife: a whale trapped in a pocket of open water as the ice begins to freeze the polar sea; deer and elk starving during severe winters; feral horses dying of thirst during severe drought. Ironically, people will mobilize to rescue animals from imminent death through Nature’s impartial evolutionary processes, while doing nothing to prevent the extinction of entire species through purposeful exploitation or environmental degradation by humans.

Why will society mobilize to rescue an animal in distress yet turn its back on a whole species facing extinction? What is our “need” to rescue? I think we’ll find it’s often not as a benevolent act as we would like to think, but rather a way to reduce our discomfort at participating in the impartial ways of Nature, ways we don’t understand and therefore want to control.

Deer and elk, for example, starve periodically in great numbers when they become overpopulated for their food supply. To rescue them under these circumstances may relieve our stress at being out of control, but will prolong the overpopulation. Our attempt to rescue is a form of participating only with the symptom, which likely will allow the cause to worsen. If, on the other hand, we do not interfere and allow Nature to treat the symptom in relationship with the cause, the entire herd will rebuild toward the next moment of balance, which will last only until the next correction must be made.

Here is a real life example. A magnificent cat came into our walled backyard. Zane, my wife, saw it and immediately wondered if it had a home. Deciding it was a stray, she wanted to feed it. I suggested we not feed it because our house was then for sale and we daily hoped to move. Anyway, what would the cat do when we left and its food was suddenly cut off. But Zane exercised her prerogative of independent action and fed it.

It turned out that the original cat did have a home, but before we learned that, three bonafide strays showed up. I objected to feeding them for the same reason as before but still found no way to articulate my concern that in the long-term

it would be unfair to the cats. So we agreed to feed them until we left. The three cats soon became five, then seven, ten, twelve, fifteen, and perhaps even more under the cloak of darkness. It was clear that we had a problem because our charitable feline “eatery” was drawing customers from hither and yon.

With time, three kittens showed up, and Zane, who loves baby animals, began to try taming them. I objected again, but to no avail. Zane said that she simply couldn’t resist them. I argued that they were domestic cats gone wild and would have to remain wild if they were to survive after we moved, which could be any day. In compromise, we adopted one of the kittens and took him into our home.

Then one day, something shifted in Zane’s understanding of the plight of our “eatery cats,” and she became concerned about their welfare once we were gone. She was now ready to reach beyond the emotional immediacy of the moment to see the integrity of the naturalness of the cats as they were—wild cats. Now she could understand that by feeding and taming them, we would hinder them in the future. Why? Because we had stolen some of their wildness, some of their integrity, some of their ability to fit into their highly -competitive environment after we left.

In addition, we had caused them to concentrate in unusually dense numbers, which grew over time in a space small to begin with and shrinking with the addition of each new cat. We had displaced most of the cats from their original hunting areas. These areas, once vacant, would be taken over by other wild cats, and the ones we had fed for so many months would have no place to go without a fight. They would now be the “outsiders,” a position from which claiming or reclaiming an already- occupied area in which to hunt would be most difficult .

We therefore began cutting back on the cats’ food to force them to hunt more. Zane remained somewhat uncertain about the short-term “cruelty” of starving the cats into hunting. But when she realized that the wildness of these cats was born of necessity and that the integrity of their wildness was their survival insurance in the naturalness of their environment, she saw the whole drama more sharply than I did.

She now understood that we had altered the cats’ abilities to participate with Nature by making such keenly-honed participation unnecessary, and that, if we really cared about them, we had a moral obligation to restore that which we’d stolen— the integrity of their wildness and their naturalness. This meant we had to withhold food, to love them with a closed hand. Such love transcends the unruly emotions, such as guilt and sadness, and enters the realm of Divine Love, where illusion and its judgments have no place.

Zane was as right from her original point of view as she is from her present point of view, albeit they differ by 180 degrees. Then she saw what she considered to be unnecessary hardship, a judgment based solely on appearance and her then-current understanding. Now she sees the integrity of an animal’s naturalness in

the context of its participation with Nature. Now she is beginning to see not only the animal but also the excellence of its fit into its environment.

But where in all of this, she asked, is compassion? Compassion is not stealing an animal's integrity in the first place. Compassion is the commitment of adopting the wild kitten plus two others we got from the animal shelter to keep him company. Compassion is acting out the conscious awareness of the long-term consequences we cause by our short-term decisions. But most important, compassion is the understanding that motivates our behavior.

Zane and I first had to interfere with the integrity of the cats before we could learn how to extend compassion. Then our two acts of compassion were adopting the three kittens into our family and returning to the other cats their integrity as full participants in Nature's drama of naturalness by loving them with a closed hand. The latter meant, however, that we had to accept Nature's impartiality of the moment, but first we had to break out of our prison of fear, which was precisely our discomfort with that impartiality .

Conscious Participation

When Zane and I first began feeding the cats, it was to accommodate her perceived sense of compassion, her sense of caring, but in reality it was also to relieve our unconscious sense of stress at seeing the impartiality of Nature in the apparently-starving, unwanted cats. Even now, with a newly-found understanding, it's still difficult for Zane to close her hand and withhold food.

Although I've practiced participating with Nature ever since I can remember, I still have much to learn because I, too, am a product of a society held prisoner by its fear of death and loss, or for that matter discomfort of any kind, which makes it impossible to participate fully with life. When motivated either by fear of or discomfort with Nature's impartiality, however, our sense of participation more often than not interferes with planetary evolution.

We must therefore ask ourselves in what way we live in the fullest measure of the moment, to say "YES" unconditionally to life, particularly when that moment is decidedly uncomfortable or even hurts. For it is by living consciously in every moment that we can participate most fully in the mutually-beneficial evolution of our home planet by honoring the God-granted integrity of our fellow travellers—the non- human animals.

Citation Format

Maser, Chris (1993) Do Animals Have Rights *Trumpeter*: 10, 3.
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