

The Myth of Consent

What do you see when you look at an animal? A kindred spirit, a creature much like you; but possibly, the very next moment, a beast, a stranger, *just* an animal. Animals are like those pictures that we see as one thing and then another; the duck that suddenly becomes a rabbit; the wine glass that's also an old woman in profile. Now the pig is a fellow creature, like Wilbur in *Charlotte's Web*. Now he's pork.

The gestalt switch produced by a picture is no special problem, but our double vision of animals has to concern us. If Wilbur is a friend, then he shouldn't be treated as bacon. If he's bacon, then we're kidding ourselves when we regard him as a friend. What's the right way to look at animals?

There are loud voices coming from animal rights organizations that tell us this is a good question to ask. Those voices seem to come from outside the mainstream. Most of us are animal lovers in the sense that we love our pets, we like to go to zoos, and we'd hate to see endangered species disappear. That animals may be used for multiple purposes is something we don't question. The animal people who want us to think twice about these things seem faintly ridiculous – like they've lost all sense of proportion.

But confusion about our relationship with animals isn't a recent invention. Our ancestors lived their lives in closer proximity to animals than most of us do, experiencing both fondness and the need to exploit them more intensely. There were plenty of signs of ambivalence way before animal rights organizations came on the scene.

Animal Spirits

Indigenous, pre-European peoples are sometimes credited with a deep and respectful relationship to nature. Perhaps that image involves a certain

amount of exaggeration and wishful thinking. The very first wave of immigrants to the Americas, those who crossed the Bering land bridge around 11,000 BCE, eventually hunted the big mammal species to extinction (at least on one theory). Gone were American horses, camels, elephants, giant ground sloths. In *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, Jared Diamond hypothesizes that these animals had evolved without any exposure to dangerous human hunters and were thus easy prey. By contrast, he writes, the mammals of Africa had evolved alongside human beings and earlier hominids, and learned to fear them.

Much later, all was not peaceful coexistence either. The Blackfoot Indians of Montana couldn't have been too soft-hearted toward the animal world. Their preferred method of hunting buffalo involved corralling them on the top of a cliff and then scaring them into throwing themselves, en masse, off the edge. One can only imagine the tumult of injured, howling animals below.

Still, native cultures do show particularly clear signs of wrestling with the two ways we can look at animals. A sign of this is found, surprisingly, in a comforting story. Joseph Campbell says the Blackfoot Indians believed the buffaloes voluntarily plunged to their deaths, obeying the command of their "animal master" – a sort of archetypal buffalo. Thus, "the animal is a willing victim, giving its flesh to be the food of the people." If only it were true! The wish for the buffalo's consent seems to reveal a desire to stay friends, to show respect, even as the animal meets a violent end. The hunters seem to want their victims' approval.

An even more thorough form of exoneration is implicit in a Blackfoot legend of a maiden who brings her father back to life under the tutelage of the lead buffalo, the animal master. With that lesson, she also learns how to bring the buffalo back to life. That was the goal behind the ritual dances that were performed by the hunters, wearing animal heads and skins. As Campbell interprets it, "The buffalo dance, properly performed, insures that the creatures slaughtered shall be giving only their bodies, not their essence, not their lives." If the buffalo don't really die, then there's a limitless supply of them, and the next hunt will meet with success. The legend and rituals are attractive for that reason, but I'm inclined to interpret the story as a symptom of unease about the carnage at the base of the cliff. It reassures the hunters that no serious violation has taken place.

Arctic Eskimos grappled with the problem of killing in a similar way. Before contact with Europeans and Americans in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, arctic peoples depended almost completely on hunting animals for the fulfillment of their basic needs. With killing being so critical

to survival, we might expect there to be complete indifference to the problems of animals. But that's not what the stories and practices of the various Eskimo cultures suggest.

The whale played a vital role as food, fuel, building materials, clothing, and so on, but it was never regarded as "nothing but" all of the above. Whales were taken to have spirits, like people do, and their spirits had to be treated with respect. Only then would the whale "give itself" to the people. This is an interpretation of whale behavior that's difficult to sustain – whales do try to avoid their deaths. Even Charles Wohlforth, a sympathetic observer of Eskimo (or more precisely, Iñupiat) customs, reports that a whale will dive away from hunters. Sometimes a whale will be harpooned six to ten times before finally becoming too exhausted to try to escape. Occasionally the whales win the contest, and swim away with their wounds. Oddly, recalcitrant whales have given something else to the people – evidence of the astonishing lifespan of bowhead whales: in 1992, a bowhead was butchered and discovered to have a stone spearhead embedded in his or her flesh, though stone hasn't been in use since the 1880s. The natural lifespan of a bowhead is now thought to be 130–150 years. It's natural to ask what drew Eskimos to the notion that whales offer themselves to hunters.

Part of the answer surely lies in the natural anxiety of a people so totally reliant on an unpredictable hunt for survival. If whales give themselves to humans now, then they can be expected to do so again in the future. In fact, the very same whale might make a second gift; Eskimos, like the Blackfoot Indians, believe in the recycling of animal spirits. But the consent of the whale is a reassuring notion for another reason. If the whale says Yes, then the hunter doesn't need to have any compunction about the hunt. And mixed feelings do seem inevitable for a people that lived in close proximity with animals, appreciating not just their abundant usefulness, but their majesty, beauty, and intelligence.

If being killed doesn't harm an animal's inner essence, could it even be *good* for the animal? One can't help but suspect an element of spin in the myths of the Ainu, the aboriginal people of the northern islands of Japan. Traditionally, a black bear cub was captured in the mountains and brought to the village, where he or she became a beloved member of a family, even being nursed by the mother. When he got older and more ferocious, he was placed in a wooden cage and fattened up for two years. The time finally had come to eat the bear, but that was good news for all, even the bear.

In a festival called "the sending away," the bear was actually now "returned" to his mountain home. Campbell reports that "the whole spirit of the feast

is of a joyous send-off, and the bear is supposed to be extremely happy.” The bear was secured by ropes and released from the cage, then paraded in a circle. At that point the people threw little bamboo arrows at him until he worked himself into a frenzy. He was then tied to a stake, skewered, and strangled. But not to be left out of the fun, the bear’s head and hide were preserved intact so he could be given a portion of the feast. While dining on his own flesh, along with some dried fish, millet dumplings, and a beverage, the bear got to listen to speeches in his honor. With such a sendoff, he was expected to return to his family in the mountains with glowing reports about the humans below.

You wouldn’t wish such hospitality on your worst enemy. But there is something remarkable here. The Ainu could have just gone bear hunting, butchered the poor beast, satisfied their hunger, and left it at that. But within their ritual, there’s a clearly discernible respect for the bear and unease about killing him. They do all these things as if to try to have their bear and eat him too.

Divine Consent

Animals who want to be eaten are dubious creatures, but in a monotheistic view of the world, all permission has to come from on high anyway. The Hebrew bible says the ruler of the universe gave humans permission to eat animals. Case closed? Not, of course, if you live in a place where the Hebrew bible seems as foreign as the Blackfoot legends seem to us. And not if you regard the bible as a cherished part of the Western canon, but nothing more. *Caveat emptor* – I’m going to approach the Good Book with no special reverence, but simply as an artifact of a particular time and place.

God does give humans permission to eat animals, but the message of the bible is complex. We need to start at the beginning to see just how complex it really is. Yahweh creates the rest of the animals before human beings. They are created on the fifth and the sixth days, “and God saw that it was good” – animals seem to be good just for themselves, not for the resources they supply to people. At the end of the sixth day, Yahweh creates human beings differently from animals – “in his own image” (Genesis 1:27). The implication: we should not see ourselves in animals and animals in ourselves – at least not too much.

Humans are immediately given dominion or rule over the animals. “Fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air

and over every living creature that moves on the ground.” (Genesis 1:28) Does ruling include eating? Rule is many things – parents rule over children, kings over their subjects. Ruling and eating certainly *seem* like different things. And in the case of human beings and animals, the deity is explicit that ruling does *not* encompass eating. The issue is immediately clarified, right after the famous “dominion” passage: “I give you every green plant for food,” God says to the first humans, “I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food” (Genesis 1:29). And then he says the same to animals, giving them “every green plant for food” (Genesis 1:30).

The authors of Genesis (plural, according to bible scholars) have it that these instructions were followed for a time. In the Garden of Eden humans and other animals live together peaceably. Because of the perfect climate, animal bones aren’t needed as building material, fur isn’t needed to make coats. The trees are laden with sustaining fruit. In the beginning it is roughly as Isaiah (11:6–7) foretells it will be in the end times:

The wolf will live with the lamb,
the leopard will lie down with the goat,
the calf and the lion and the yearling together;
The cow will feed with the bear ...
their young will lie down together,
and the lion will eat straw like the ox.

The Garden of Eden prefigures the peaceable kingdom, the harmonious world depicted in Edward Hicks’ famous painting by that name (the first version made in 1820).

Paradise is ruined when Eve takes the serpent’s advice and eats from the wrong tree; not one of the fruit-laden trees, but the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Human beings degenerate, each generation becoming more lawless than the last. Yahweh decides to get rid of all living things in a giant flood. The whole project of creating humans and animals has turned out to be a big mistake. But he holds back: Noah’s family and a pair from each species are allowed to survive on the ark until the waters subside.

Remarkably, in his very first speech to the survivors after they reach land, Yahweh says “Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything” (Genesis 9:3). Whether animals may be killed for food is a matter with that much importance! The answer is that animals *can* be used for food, but it’s a little more complex than that. Eat animals, yes, “But you must not eat meat

that has its lifeblood in it” (Genesis 9:4), says the deity; “for the blood is the life” (Deuteronomy 12:23; see also Leviticus 17:11 and 14). What to do with the blood? Spill it out on the altar. Yes, the altar. For killing animals is not mundane work for butchers, but sacred work for priests.

Animals were *not* originally created just to be our food. After being designated edible, they retained a place in the deity’s embrace. In fact, God establishes a covenant with humans *and* animals – “an everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind” (Genesis 9:15). Five times the covenant is declared, and each time animals are explicitly included. The deity sends human beings down a middle path: eat animals, use them, but (he seems to say) it’s really not ideal. Animals “count” in the eyes of God, even as humans are given the prerogative to eat them.

The myths of the Blackfoot Indians, the Eskimos, and the Ainu all seem like symptoms of an underlying unease. They reveal a vision of animals not as mere things to be consumed and exploited, but as living beings, creatures that matter in a special way. The Hebrew bible reveals the same sensitivity, but engenders more puzzlement. There is a powerful god, the authors of Genesis tell us, one who created the universe and everything in it. He created animals that were good – good in themselves, and not just good as resources. But then ... what are *we* doing eating them for dinner, they must have wondered.

Answer: that’s not what God originally intended. Things went downhill after a perfect beginning. It was either wipe us out or capitulate somewhat to our evil ways, and God chose the second option. Well, it was better than annihilation! And he didn’t capitulate entirely: eat the flesh, he ordered, not the blood. Permission was granted, but not without qualification.

The message of Genesis is certainly an inconvenient one. Orthodox Jews today take the injunction not to eat the blood of an animal in all seriousness. Kosher meat preparation involves thoroughly draining an animal’s blood and then salting the flesh to draw out every last trace. This is not a recipe for producing juicy steaks and it’s only symbolically humane (for evidence that kosher practices today are cruel to animals, see the Humane Kosher website in the sources for this chapter). Surely the important thing is the way animals are treated while alive, a matter on which kosher rules say very little. Still, a true adherent of the bible will not be a blithe and indifferent animal exploiter.

The myth of animal consent is completely anxiety-relieving. The animals themselves consent to be eaten – there’s nothing to worry about, no need for restrictions. In fact, that myth is coupled with the even more soothing

idea that animals come back to life after death. Neither of these ideas is in the bible: animals don't consent to be killed; ideas about an afterlife in much later bible passages and especially Christian scripture apply to human beings only, never to animals. The bible's message about animals is a mixed one, bordering on contradictory, but it still gives us the green light. Permission from the ruler of the universe, like permission from animals themselves, absolves us of guilt. There are complexities and restrictions, but in the end the message is clear: killing animals for food isn't a crime.

Let's Make a Deal

The myth of consent has a modern version, free of whales who want to be eaten and gods who tell us what we may and may not do. Stephen Budiansky, a journalist who has written many books about animals, comes to the defense of consuming and otherwise using domesticated animals in his 1999 book *The Covenant of the Wild: Why Animals Chose Domestication*.

Domestication, he says, is a deal that's struck at the interface between town and country. The ancestors of dogs were wolves who hung around the camps of humans, helping themselves to our meat scraps and the warmth of our fires. These must have been the more docile and dependent members of the species, and with each subsequent generation, the even more docile and dependent were preferred and protected. Ultimately, a free and fair bargain was struck. Animals came to us for an easier life. We gave it to them, and in exchange we shortened the lives of some of them and used their bodies to meet our own needs. The comic book version of Budiansky's hypothesis would show (in Gary Larson style) a cow and a human being shaking hands, with the cow saying, "It's a deal. If I can graze in your pasture, you can eat me for dinner." So – not so different from the consenting buffalo, the generous whale, the happy bear – the cow actually consents to being eaten. Implicitly, of course.

The "covenant" has worked out to mutual advantage, says Budiansky. What's the evidence? We've been well-fed for thousands of years, and domesticated animals have thrived: there are estimated to be on the order of 1.5 billion cattle and buffalo on the face of the earth, 1.75 billion sheep and goats, 2 billion pigs, and 24 billion chickens.

The consenting whale and buffalo, the bear who's about to go home, all seem like creatures of the imagination. They seem like products of wishful

thinking, tailor made to make people feel better about the violent things they have to do to stay alive. Budiansky's account is less fanciful, but I suspect no more plausible. The number of cows, pigs, and chickens in the world today hasn't been reached by natural means, with each mating being in any sense a vote for domesticated life and death. Reproduction in domesticated animals is largely under human control. Chickens don't multiply by choice, but as a result of business decisions, and often by artificial insemination. There are twice as many chickens today as there were ten years ago because executives estimated demand and manufactured supply. There are lots and lots of chickens for the same kinds of reasons that there are lots and lot of computers.

A true mutualism is another matter. Take, for example, the relationship between aphids and ants. The aphids secrete honeydew, a sugary substance they form by eating plants; the ants milk them by stimulating them with their antennae. (Actually, "milk" is a bit of a euphemism; this is really coprophagia, to put it delicately.) The ants get food from the aphids, and in return they protect the aphids from their predators, such as ladybugs. The metaphor of a covenant is poetic but apt.

But the number of chickens in the vicinity of humans can't be read that way. Chickens are powerless captives reproducing at a rapid rate because human breeders have production quotas to fill. Even if domesticated animals were proliferating naturally, and not as a result of business decisions, their numbers couldn't necessarily be counted as being to their advantage. The aphids are better off because of ants, and ants better off because of aphids. But our proliferating chicken stocks are crammed into their small cages for the duration of their short lives. Existence is not a good thing for the thousands of pigs packed tightly into factory farms. The covenant metaphor doesn't measure up to the modern realities.

Consider that Gary Larson-esque cartoon. No actual cow ever did strike such a bargain – "If you give me space in your pasture, I'll let you eat me." It's not even plausible that cows struck such a bargain implicitly. The cows of old wanted the pasture, period, and weren't capable of looking over the terms of a contract. But would they have, should they have, if it had been possible?

If there really were animal masters, archetypal cows that could strike bargains on behalf of all cows, and archetypal chickens who represented chickens, it's hard to say if they would. Certainly, we would not, not even if we were facing extinction. There are tiny indigenous tribes struggling to survive in inhospitable areas of the world and various bargains they could strike with richer nations to ensure their survival and proliferation. Human

beings have no taste for each other's flesh, but a dwindling people could agree to be organ donors for people in affluent countries in exchange for being richly supported. To sweeten the deal, the donors could be guaranteed 50 years of life, before any donations were required. You can imagine a "covenant" of this sort leading to longer life for thousands of affluent westerners and a vast increase in population for the struggling tribe. The fact is, it would not be agreed to. The tribal leaders would consider the plan intolerably demeaning.

No chicken or cow has ever felt his position in life was demeaning. But the animal masters might wish to protect their brethren nevertheless, thinking one can be demeaned whether one knows it or not. They might. What's certain is that the animal masters would not accept the deal that's currently on offer. They wouldn't see the advantage of there being lots of chickens or pigs or cows, if each is trapped in a cage or squeezed into a stall; subjected to surgeries without anesthesia; transported to the slaughter house in a cramped, hot truck; and then killed young and possibly painfully. (For more on modern farming, see Chapter 7.)

Budiansky's bargaining cows and chickens are the pseudo-scientific shadows of the bear who returns to the mountains, the buffalo who gives his body to the people, the whale who cares more about humans than about herself and her own offspring. They're designed to relieve us of moral uncertainty. Even under the best of conditions, I don't think a farmer could look at his cow, on slaughtering day, and honestly tell himself the cow has agreed to be eaten. But today's industrial farmer must truly be guilty of self-deception if he thinks his relationship with his livestock is consensual.

The Blackfoot Indians, the Eskimos, the Ainu of Japan, and the ancient Israelites teach us to recognize our competing urges – the desire to have our bear and eat it too. For us these feelings tend to be buried, suppressed, and forgotten, so we would do well to pay attention. On the other hand, their salves don't work so well for us. We have difficulty believing that animals don't simply die when we slit their throats or strangle them. They surely don't consent to their deaths. Many Eskimos today still seem to sincerely believe that the whale makes a gift of herself to her killers, and it may seem disrespectful to say this is just not true, but we really don't pay respect to people by being uncritical of their ideas, as if they were hypersensitive children.

Whales don't have the mental equipment to think about humans and their needs, nor should we think they would put us before themselves if they

did. If they really were such sophisticated thinkers and such altruists, there would be an overwhelmingly powerful reason not to accept their gift: whales would have to be seen as our fellows, not as our fodder. (Should the Eskimos stop hunting whales? We'll come back to this difficult issue in Chapter 9.)

We ought to shine the same critical light on cultures that are closer up and more populous. How plausible is the idea of a supreme being who takes an avid interest in our well-being, and gives people permission to eat animals? If there is a supreme being, maybe the bible is right, and he ordained on the sixth day that we shouldn't harm animals; he said "I give you the green plants for food" and never changed his mind about what we should eat. Or it may be that there's no supreme being at all, that a god who tells us what's good and bad is as mythical as a whale who consents to being eaten. In a divinely ordained world, it doesn't seem as if we'd even be tempted to eat the bodies of our animal cousins. They didn't *have* to be so tasty!

Our ancestors have to be honored for seeing the difference between eating fruit from a tree and snuffing the life out of another creature. Perhaps there is even some wisdom to be gleaned from their stories. For example, there may be a kernel of truth in the bible's notion of respectful exploitation. It might be right to listen to Eskimo talk about showing respect to animals. But what exactly does respect entail? Kosher meat-preparation rules go to great lengths to ensure that only muscle fiber and fat are consumed, and never blood. But does this do the animals any good? When a whaler gives a dead whale a "drink" by pouring a cup of water into its blow-hole, is this really respectful in any important and substantial sense?

More basically, we are going to have to ask whether we should accept the "respectful exploitation" stance in the first place. On the face of it, respectful exploitation is an oxymoron. If we respect, we don't exploit. If we exploit, we don't respect. Or is the level of respect an animal is due something that varies depending on species, and that's compatible sometimes with using animals as food, fertilizer, farm machinery, fuel, and the rest?

The main point for now is that it *is* troubling to use animals to meet our needs, as all these people, so far apart in space and time, realized. Killing an animal is not like pulling a carrot out of the ground. When we kill, even to satisfy our most basic needs, we do something that should give us pause.