



just says no:

Animal Rights, Human Ethics, and Academic Posturing

UPC raises some basic questions that about the ways we sustain our lives. While this writer has a great deal of respect for what Ms. Davis and UPC are doing, it doesn't mean that we agree with all their thinking on these matters. We are also grateful that someone is willing to raise these issues for examination and discussion.

Big Concepts

UPC apparently chooses to define itself within the fairly narrow political and academic bounds of the modern University, although Ms. Davis sets her self apart from this too. She would like to dine at their table, but is apparently assigned a lesser seat.

Since I am neither an environmentalist nor an academic I could just ignore the elaborately constructed moral universes that are imagined into existence in these institutions, but as a thinking person I can't help but comment on some serious problems they sidestep.

For all their appearance of wrestling with deep moral issues, ethics and philosophic debate, the pundits of deep ecology and environmentalism can really only offer personal opinions and value judgments that are meant to be taken as sacred pronouncements.

From a logical point of view these grand schemes are constructs, intellectual sandcastles and symbolic entities that may or may not relate to the observable world. Although they cloak themselves in science, too many aspects of environmentalism and deep ecology are really nothing less than secular religions, and the pronouncements that issue forth under their banner are generally those of people playing god. Junk science and true science have been mixed indiscriminantly to further political agendas or generate new doom scenarios that inevitably call for further intervention, legislation and control.

Generalizing, taking a specific and conceptualizing it, is a human characteristic; it might be related to our extensive use of language and symbol. There is nothing wrong with this as long as it is seen for what it is, a concept, and a mental tool.

What about the case of "big thinking" ecologists who claim that only the species is important and individual lives are insignificant. This is

meant to demonstrate the ability for broad, conceptual thought, but is actually a hollow pose, the intellectual equivalent of bird plumage.

There can be no species without individuals. A species is a convenient term and a useful concept, but in nature a species is a population of individual lives. Only individuals can strive and live. A species doesn't think, eat, act, run, sleep, live or die. Only an individual can do these things. It is legitimate to speak of a "species" only if this is kept in mind. Anything else is intellectually dishonest.

Such inconsistency is easily exposed. How many deep ecologists who deplore human civilization and human beings as a blot on our overpopulated "natural" world actually follow this train of thought to its logical conclusion and kill themselves to create a better world? I suspect very few or none. On the other hand, my choice for continued personal survival is entirely consistent with my belief in primacy of the individual in any ethical and philosophical discussions.

Farm Animals-Farming People

We agree with the position that the Callicott and Leopold brand of intellectual purity (wild is better!) is unattractive, rigid and false. We will go further and suggest that it contains a logical inconsistency. Or does it? The characteristics these authors chose when assigning farm animals their lower place in the ethical order could as easily be applied to modern, denatured, industrial man as it could to a battery hen, especially in the sort of reductionist universe that academics flourish in.

This may not be the inconsistency or oversight that it appears to be. Part of the more radical environmental agenda usually concerns measures for population control or reduction. If the bulk of humanity has status somewhere between a scourge on the earth and an over-bred farm animal, solving population problems is less difficult from a moral point of view.

Free Markets of Energy

This may not be a popular viewpoint, but one can make a very good case for free-market types of interactions as being the basic model that produces order in the observable world.

If we think of the natural world as an energy economy – food/energy in, actions out – one thing becomes clear. Creatures that survive do so because they find a specialized niche in some relational web and they perform one task or function that is essential to other members of the web.

When you look at an economy of voluntary exchange, one that is truly free of coercive interventions, you find the same sort of relational order.

Human economic survival clearly depends on a balance of many separate individual actions. While each actor tries to maximize their personal situation, their natural self-interest is limited by the mutual nature of exchange itself. The self-interest of the deer is balanced by the self-interest of the wolf, and so on up and down the ranks of living creatures. Self-interest, and not some supra-consciousness of species and ecological webs, is at the heart of the order we see in the natural world.

This model can be transferred to other processes as well. Take the distribution of suspended matter in moving water. Newtonian laws tell us that the suspended matter will travel along until other factors act to change the current state of affairs. The pebbles would be happy to be carried along forever, but their weight and the current's velocity conspire to drop them out in ever-smaller dimensions, down to the finest silt. The entire orderly creation of a sand bar or beach berm takes place through the mutual satisfaction of various competing forces or "interests" that give rise to a naturally imposed order. The problem of distribution is solved by the interaction of spontaneous "markets" for mass, velocity, turbulence, drag and a host of other physical factors.

Citing Authority

Callicott apparently derives his authority by citing Leopold. Does Leopold's legitimacy come from his opinions and observations as recounted in *Sand County Almanac*, or does he too use an earlier citing as a basis for legitimacy? The formation of academic gods and goddesses can be an interesting shell game to watch.

Chickens as chairs or tables

As far as the question of intelligence versus "conditioned behaviors" goes, if you were to turn a chicken and one of these esteemed gentlemen loose in a wild forest to live on their own resources for a year, with only their natural endowments, I'd bet on the chicken.

Karen Davis's point that we are made more comfortable by assigning some creatures to a state of existential meaninglessness as a way to insulate ourselves from that hideous possibility is well taken.

Superior Beings- Superior Organisms

This is dangerous ground, one that has been trod by some of history's least savory characters. Establishing grounds for superiority is shaky and difficult to justify, except when motivated by self-interest.

Elites-

There is a strong strain of elitism that runs through the environmental community. Only environmentalists apparently know the proper relation to nature and wilderness. Only this expert or that one is capable of dictating how land and resources should be used. Only a bureaucrat can properly define human property rights, responsibilities and legal standing.

Sorry, this sort of thinking scares me. It also doesn't work.

Evolutionary Kinship –Thinking like a mountain and other fine sentiments

This feels as though it is the emotional side of conceptualizing. We all do it, but it needn't be glorified into dogma.

I really love my chickens but I'm not sure I feel an evolutionary kinship with what are essentially little feathered dinosaurs. What I do feel is an intense respect for another consciousness, one with bright, sharp eyes and lots of curiosity.

Consciousness

Consciousness is not given much respect by western science but it is a powerful concept that has been given serious study by Buddhists and others. It also supplies the "unifying ethic" Davis speaks of trying to reach or find. Something also tells me that when it comes to ethics, academia is not the place to find them.

In respect to consciousness and cognition, the writings of Drs. Kaplan and Rogers are among the strongest cards in the UPC hand.

Feminist Rhetoric

No disrespect is intended, but constant references to males and men as a single, amorphous entity is really no different than Callicott's refusal to see the individuals inside a species.

I believe Davis falls into the same trap when she classifies the tendency for conceptualization and classification as a male function. Surely this is something that women are capable of too, even if they apparently can use other modes of thought as well? At what point do you leave the territory of the metaphor and merely become abusive? If this is a problem, isn't it really a problem with human consciousness?

I know what you mean about men, generalizations are usually born out of near-truths, but if gender abuse is wrong for the gander, it is also wrong for the goose.

At least my chickens are happy

Animal suffering is real. Not all of it is human inflicted but a lot is. It is very much easier not to think about this. Some of it could be eliminated fairly easily but some aspects, including farming and food production are not as easy. This is a complex issue and it doesn't help to portray it as a one-dimensional struggle of good and evil.

There are some very important questions about the current trends in food production that would benefit from a reasoned discussion about problems and solutions.

Can "family farms" feed 20th century populations? Do we need new agricultural models to meet current world conditions? There are a lot of serious issues about division of labor and food production that are lost in a storm of partisan politics and Emotionalism.

We also need to admit the extent to which politicization can critically impact food production. A blatant example can be found in Zimbabwe's recent switch from net exporter to net importer of food. This was a direct result of a political, rather than agricultural or meteorological conditions.

The struggles over food regulation, food choices (food fascism?) production, subsidies, land use and product labeling in the US represent the same ideological struggles in a different format.

Faced with all this it may be inadequate to say that my chickens are happy, and that they are helping to feed a small group of humans in a cooperative and ethical way. But at least it's a start and it's not just talk or dreams

One reason Mom and Pop farms disappear is because Mom and Pop decide to up stakes and move to the city where the work is easier and there's more stuff to buy and do. And since it's the specialization of labor that's given us all this increased abundance and freedom in the first place, why shouldn't they? There are a lot of other factors at work too.

Maybe Mom and Pop's farm has had its' day and it's time to devolve even lower into a really diverse collection of backyard chickens, geese, goats and cows, all putting real food back onto dinner tables everywhere. There would need to be new markets for distribution as well as production, all probably quite impossible under current legal and regulatory regimes. Changing would be quite a shift in status quo, but any realignment of the food supply is bound to be.

Obviously, not everyone can raise chickens or grow vegetables or even wants to. Elsewhere on these pages you can find the outline of a simple economic model that seeks to maximize the benefits of a small chicken flock by creating local support/consumption networks. The basic concept of extending the benefits of animal husbandry to people who are not concerned with direct responsibilities or costs can easily be applied elsewhere.

The more you read about what happens in large-scale animal operations, deeper the moral dilemma becomes. Philosophically and practically I distrust imposed or governmental solutions to matters of real importance. Russia was a net food exporter before it tinkered with social justice and class warfare. So having a dozen chickens and starting an egg route starts to look like a positive good in a negative world.

It may not be much but at least I can say that my chickens are happy; really happy. And so are their friends.