

# THE INQUIRER

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Sing with Rising Green

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animals are pets and others  
are stock

Save the whales (and the pigs and the chickens)! says **Jenny Jones**

# Rethinking our animal relationships

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*‘Soon the circle [of compassion]... includes first a class, then a nation, then a coalition of nations, then all humanity, and finally, its influence is felt in the dealings of man with the animal world’ – WH Lecky*

A while ago I watched the Greenpeace movie, *How to Change the World*, and was reminded of their early battle cry, ‘Save the Whales!’ At about the same time there were reports of several strandings of whales on British and European beaches. The outpourings of public compassion reflected our conflicted relationships to animals.

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We love them, we care for them and yet we also treat them – or allow them to be treated on our behalf – in ways which would horrify us if we really understood, if we really saw them. When I say it’s complicated, that’s a massive understatement. Why, for example, does it make the national news when whales are stranded on beaches? Why do we feel pain on their behalf – and at some level we, too, are hurt? Why do people work long and hard trying to rescue whales and lead them back out to sea? If a super-intelligent alien race landed on this planet from some far-flung galaxy, what would it make of us when it observed:

- We treasure some animals as pets and treat them like favoured members of our family. (Sometimes we get on better with them than with our human family members.)
- The animals that we designate food are treated as if they were mere units of production. Their poor, nasty, brutish and short lives are hidden away from us (and that’s the way we like it).
- Certain individual animals achieve fame and are treated like celebrities – Inky the octopus who escaped from his aquarium in New Zealand, Shamu the killer whale, Red Rum, Arkle, or going back a bit further, Cheeta, the chimp in the Tarzan movies.
- Teams of us will work long and hard to rescue a stranded whale, whilst other teams (Japanese, Norwegian, Icelandic) work long and hard to kill them.
- In Britain we eat certain types of animals, yet we

“Perhaps we can hold such widely differing ideas about animals in our heads because of how removed we have become from the processes involved.”

revolt at the choices made in other cultures, where horses, cats, dogs, monkeys and insects may all find their way onto the dinner table. We find those choices bizarre or disgusting, but we do not recognise that our own choices could be just as bizarre or disgusting.

- Despite the way we treat some animals there are others – such as whales – which fill us with awe, and for whom we feel instinctive empathy. I went vegetarian six years ago. At the time my reasons were largely about climate change and the global food supply and only a bit about the quality of life for the animals. Up until that

point, I’d consumed them with gusto. And for most of my life my ideas about eating meat had been pretty mainstream.

## Some we love, some we kill

I could both love an individual animal, yet eat another one which had been killed for me as if the action had no more meaning, effect or consequences than eating a salad. There’s a cognitive dissonance. We appreciate the sight of a spring lamb gambolling in the fields, and watch its mother calling it protectively to her side. Yet we also anticipate our Sunday roast with that same lamb, possibly, served up studded with garlic and spiked with rosemary.

(My mouth can still water at the thought...)

Perhaps we can hold such widely differing ideas about animals in our heads because of how removed we have become from the processes involved. We can only carry on eating meat because we are not confronted with what’s going on behind the scenes to bring that roast to our plate.

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“Teams of us will work long and hard to rescue a stranded whale, whilst other teams (Japanese, Norwegian, Icelandic) work long and hard to kill them.”

Photo by Skeeze via Pixabay

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Reading the book of Genesis, I was brought up short with the realisation that in Eden, all creatures were vegan. Not just human beings, but animals too – it’s all there in Chapter 1:29-30. Animals were created – not to be man’s prey – but his companions:

*‘God said, “See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so.’ (Genesis 1:29-30 New Revised Standard Version)*

### Paradise was vegan

In the beginning, humans got fruits and seeds, animals got salad. So when humans were expelled from Paradise, wasn’t just a fall for humans, but a fall for all of Creation. After the fall, death – and specifically killing – enters the world; the deaths of humans and the deaths of animals.

Paradise before the fall is Isaiah’s vision of the peaceable kingdom, that New Jerusalem when Paradise is restored (which we hear about every Christmas if we listen to the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols). It is significant that vegetarianism and in fact veganism (there’s no milk, cheese or eggs in the Paradise diet) is considered the ideal condition of existence. ‘None shall kill in all my holy mountain’ (Isaiah, 11.9).

Obviously the Genesis version isn’t factually true in the sense that as far as we know, life evolved with higher organisms feeding on lower organisms and thus meat eating came in very early on. And nature seems to function just as one massive food chain – although unlike human beings, nature usually takes just what it needs. But are we simply the animals who’ve made it to the top of the food chain? Or are we more than that? We don’t actually *have* to prey on other animals to the extent we do – we have the luxury of choice. And do we owe it not just to our fellow humans and the planet to reduce or end our consumption of animals – or do we also owe it to the animals themselves?

Perhaps that Biblical veganism *is* true as an ethical ideal – and it’s the underlying ethic that interests me; that killing other creatures, whether men or animals, is wrong, and in a perfect world wouldn’t happen.

Whatever we eat, of course, we still have to kill a lot of plants, and it’s true that in the course of arable farming, many small animals and insects are killed. Collateral damage. Maybe that’s inevitable.

### Must we love mosquitoes?

And I can’t really get my head round expanding my circle of compassion to include *all* animals. Mosquitoes? Tapeworms? Headlice??! All creatures seems too much of a tall order, and unrealistic (although not for Buddhists...). Sentient animals – that seems more rational. But wherever we draw the line, there’s no reason for not going some of the way – for doing what we can, and not despairing over what we cannot. Perhaps nothing in life can be totally pure, but vegetarianism and especially veganism show much more reverence for life than does the farming of animals for meat. (I’m just slightly worried that with our increasing scientific knowledge we’ll discover that plants too have some sort of consciousness – and then what will we do!)

I have this gut feeling (and I use that term advisedly) that veganism is the right way forward, though I can’t help wanting to pray – as St Augustine did – ‘O Lord, make me good, but not yet’. Augustine had sexual continence in mind whereas I have food – boiled eggs with buttered toast in particular! But it’s the same dilemma. Our consciences push us in a direction we don’t really want to go. We cling on by our fingernails to our comfortable way of life. And it takes some extraordinary effort or greater understanding or enlightenment to move us to that higher plane or more virtuous existence. I’m not there yet.

### Begin where you are

But I was encouraged by words from the Unitarian Universalist minister Forrest Church. In a 2004 sermon he talked about making changes by beginning here, where we are right now, and as we are. And not by looking for perfection, but by beginning small and dreaming possible dreams. (See the sermon here: <https://bit.ly/2m9ubcO>)

One of the secrets to a happy life is for one’s way of living to be aligned with one’s core values. We become unhappy if we are living faithlessly, not being true to ourselves.

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# Is it time to give up meat?

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Cognitive dissonance is psychologically traumatic. It makes us miserable but frequently, our tendency is not to root out the cause but to treat the symptoms instead. So we try to avoid situations which make us aware of difficult, conflicting issues. That's why we hide our factory-farming away and manage not to be aware of it – despite sharing our environment with literally millions of industrially farmed pigs, chickens and calves.

## Suffering beyond killing

I'm sure we'd all subscribe to the idea, no matter what our diet, that we shouldn't cause unnecessary suffering to animals. At least we think we do. But what do we consider necessary suffering – the sort we think it's OK to inflict? It's not as if we can ask the animals – they can't give or withhold their consent.

Instances of suffering which we seem to consider necessary include:

- Calves are separated from their mothers within hours of birth (12-72). Cows have maternal feelings and this separation is traumatic for them. They bellow for days, crying their pain, just as we would. It's traumatic for the calves, who have the same built-in need for bonding with their mothers that human babies do. This happens every year for dairy cows. They don't just lose one child, they lose all of them.
- The industrial process of slaughter (including, frequently, the hours-long drive to the slaughter house penned in a cattle truck without food or water).
- Factory-style farming in general. According to Yuval Noah Harari, writing in the *Guardian*, Scientists have established: 'Farm animals are sentient beings, with intricate social relations and sophisticated psychological patterns. They may not be as intelligent as us, but they certainly know pain, fear and loneliness. They too can suffer, and they too can be happy.' Modern farming practice prevents natural life and causes suffering on an industrial scale.

We play up our differences from animals, and our superior intelligence, regarding ourselves as a different order of being entirely, whilst knowing that they are capable of relationships with us and each other, and that relationship is not confined to mammals. Birds, too, (in the wild) have feelings for each other.

Another instance of cognitive dissonance; earlier in the year, the news was all over the media that a faithful stork had returned for the 15th year in a row to his mate who, with an injured wing, is unable to make the annual migration. 'Every spring' we were told, 'the Croatian public anxiously waits for the male stork to return to his partner, and every year thus far he has proved himself a faithful mate, much to everyone's delight.'

On the one hand we celebrate a 15-year relationship between two birds, a relationship which has lasted longer than many human marriages. On the other hand, we confine billions of chickens to tiny spaces within massive warehouses where any

semblance of natural life and normal relationships is denied. In the UK, the stocking density is such that a fully-grown chicken gets a space smaller than an A4 piece of paper. Free-range and organic production insist on more space, but the typical Sunday roast chicken will have more room in the oven while being cooked than it ever had to live in when alive. If that race of highly intelligent aliens I imagine came to earth, and decided to farm us for meat, would we willingly accept our fate? Would we think it only fair and just, since they, with their superior intelligence, are in relationship to us as we are to cows and chickens? Would that give them the right to pen us in warehouses and breed us for meat? And if those aliens, just because they're more intelligent, *don't* have the right to farm us, do we have the right to impose that on animals? Or should the Golden Rule (do as you would be done by) be extended to animals?

The 19th-century philosopher WH Lecky, who came up with the concept of the circle of compassion, was a vegetarian. He also wrote: 'I venture to maintain that there are multitudes to whom the necessity of discharging the duties of a butcher would be so inexpressibly painful and revolting, that if they could obtain a flesh diet on no other condition, they would relinquish it forever.'

## Acting from an ethical standpoint

Killing is hard; but how much more revolting is the life of industrially farmed animals *before* they are killed?

As compassionate creatures, who share 80% of our DNA with cows, maybe now's the time we should consider expanding our circle of compassion to include not just celebrity animals, not just pet animals, not just awesomely magnificent animals, but all sentient animals. How we treat animals raises tough questions – and for each one of us, the answers may be slightly different. But we need to consider the questions and formulate and act from an ethical standpoint which feels authentic and true for us.

Maybe then, if that race of super-intelligent aliens ever come to pay us a visit, we'll be able to look them in the eye and fairly expect to be treated with compassion and as equals.



**Further Information:** Jenny recommends the film *Earthlings* or the book, *Eating Animals* by Jonathan Safran Foer.



## Jenny Jones

Jenny Jones is a member of St Saviourgate Unitarian Chapel, York. She is also a member of the Penal and Social Affairs Panel of the Unitarian General Assembly. Her PSAP essay on meat will appear in a later issue.